

# Life & Times

## *It's The Sun Wot Won It*

*'It's The Sun Wot Won It'* was the headline that *The Sun* chose for their newspaper on 11 April 1992. It was in response to the slim Conservative victory in the general election when the preceding polls had suggested that Neil Kinnock's Labour were on course for an equally slim victory. *The Sun* had campaigned hard against Kinnock who, himself, blamed *The Sun* for his loss.

Since then the headline has become somewhat of an urban legend of how the media can influence rather than inform the public. This was further demonstrated in a more eerie fashion by an insidious experiment carried out by Facebook in January 2012 where the emotions of users (689 003 people) were, unknowingly to them, manipulated by showing them more 'positive' or 'negative' posts.<sup>1</sup>

### DISPROPORTIONATE HYSTERIA

Occasionally, the worlds of media and health care can clash in a way that has pronounced consequences in the real world. While the media may intend to inform, they invariably end up influencing a somewhat frenzied, albeit predictable, behaviour in the public.

Currently this is being demonstrated in the case of the recent deaths caused by Invasive Group A Streptococcus infection. The dramatic news headlines of the unfortunate deaths of children (fifteen under the age of 15, at the time of writing)<sup>2</sup> may intend to inform and protect the public but to what extent are they actually causing harm and, thus, counterproductive?

What are the public being advised to do? Official advice tells us that '*warning signs of invasive disease include a fever (temperature above 38°C) and severe muscle aches*'. Since the term 'severe' is fairly subjective, this could realistically include anyone with a fever. Parental advice is that they should see the GP if the child is getting worse, has had a dry nappy for more than 12 hours, feels hotter than usual when the chest and back are touched, is feeding less than usual, and is more tired or irritable than usual. A visit to



casualty is suggested if the child is having difficulty breathing, turns blue, or is floppy or not responding.<sup>3</sup> All sensible advice but is there any evidence that the majority of parents do not already adhere to such guidance irrespective of a deadly invasive bacterial infection outbreak? Is this advice not relevant to every winter when infective conditions are peaking?

All this media attention results in more parents making contact with health services for minor illnesses that they perhaps would normally have managed at home. The result is more people waiting longer to speak to or see a health professional and enduring even longer waits at A&E or for arrival of ambulances. Local doctor messaging groups are receiving frequent messages about which local pharmacies have run out of certain antibiotics. All of these occurrences are unintended but expected consequences of the disproportionate hysteria that has been whipped up by various outlets.

### HOOKING THE CONSUMER VIA 'NEWS'

Modern means of communication were meant to be tools. A tool, by its nature, is meant to be used to carry out a certain function or job; designed to make the users life easier. However, due to the modern corporate nature of the majority of media

formats, we are now more consumers than users. As a result, it is the consumer that has become a tool through which corporate profits are realised. To ensure a steady flow of profits, said consumer must remain hooked to new, sensational, and up-to-date information, irrespective of whether it is of any use to them.

With the hyped-up rhetoric of a failing NHS, is it responsible to create more turmoil and agitation for the same NHS, further sending it into a downward spiral of increased waiting times and poor access? Is there any evidence of public health campaigns, such as this, actually improving outcomes for patients? With the NHS being constantly judged by what it doesn't do (missed cancer diagnoses, waiting lists, lack of GP appointments, and long ambulance waits) rather than what it does do (countless patients treated and lives saved), it can do without the further unnecessary diversion of healthy people towards it through campaigns such as this.

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