

Covignorance and the age of unreason

To the Editor,

Many conspiracy minded folks point to the doctors who are questioning not only the government response to COVID-19, but the efficacy of the vaccines as well, as evidence of a conspiracy. They also argue that the low death rate which varies greatly depending on age, but seems to have an overall rate of 0.02 per cent as further evidence of a conspiracy. 'Why the lock downs and restrictions for such a small death rate?' they say. Some of them point to something called the Great Barrington Declaration, which is only one of a multitude of online petitions created by some epidemiologists and public health scientists who are not only questioning the policy of lockdowns as an effective way to deal with the epidemic, but they are advocating herd immunity using something called 'focused protection.' The petition currently has 910,000 plus signatures, which appears like a very large number. But when you take the total of all doctors in the world- 9.2 million, nurses ? 18.1 million, and scientists ? 8.8 million, the total signatures represent a mere 0.032 per cent. Which means the vast majority, 99.968 per cent, of doctors, nurses and health care practitioners support the current medical evidence and policies. The stats get even worse for the conspiracy minded folks when you consider that any old 'concerned citizen' can sign the petition as well. They argue that a death rate of 0.02 per cent is a sign of a conspiracy, but that 0.032 per cent of people speaking out is a sign of truth tellers. How does one make sense of all this contrary information when only 99.968 per cent of doctors, nurses, and health practitioners world wide agree on vaccines and isolation to stop spreading the virus?

The misunderstanding does not stop there. Many conspiracy minded people along with many of those in the 'naturopath' field believe that the best way to fight COVID-19 is through fresh air, healthy food, and exercise. In my mind at least, these claims are akin to the claim made by the South African government of Thabo Mbeki that AIDS can be treated with garlic, beet root, and lemon juice. Ridiculous to say the least. As evidence I present the indigenous people of north and south America who arguably had the best diet, the most exercise and fresh air of possibly any civilization on earth prior to European contact, but it did not protect them from smallpox or the flu, because that's not how immune systems work. Here we have the difference between quality of life vs immunity. These two are not interchangeable as many seem to believe. You can be super healthy and still die from a virus because you have no antibodies to fight it. Historically, in places where measles was frequent there were far less deaths than in places where measles was never introduced and subsequently in places where vaccines were used it was mild to non-existent. In fact, I feel a little foolish writing this as I really believed it was common knowledge.

Vaccine skepticism and conspiracies are nothing new. Historically speaking every vaccine has had some sort of misinformation attached to it that was unfounded and not backed up with evidence and put forward by a small percentage of conspiracy minded people including doctors. The belief that the MMR vaccine causes autism has been thoroughly debunked along with the beliefs that the Pertussis vaccine causes epilepsy, the Pneumococcus vaccine causes diabetes, the HEP B vaccine causes sudden infant death syndrome, the HPV vaccine causes blood clots or my personal favorite that the smallpox vaccine would turn you into a cow.

There are still many people who believe that the MMR vaccine causes autism despite mounds of evidence to the contrary. Why do false beliefs persist despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary? The issue, as I see it, is not one of evidence, the issue often revolves around ideology, pride (refusing to admit when you are wrong), and ignorance (not understanding how we know what we know). Pride and saving face have been sources of folly since time immemorial, and so has ignorance, but ideology is a relatively new phenomenon. Ideology is essentially a set of beliefs or philosophies attributed to a person or a group of persons especially when they are held for reasons that are not meant to validate knowledge. When practical elements of a person's beliefs become as prominent as theoretical ones it is often difficult to distinguish what is actually true or false. For example if you believe that governments are constantly lying to us, when they tell the truth, you will most likely not believe it because of your previous beliefs. This can also be called mental rigidity or black and white thinking. Sadly, confirmation bias often leads us to seek out information that upholds previous beliefs and to dismiss those to the contrary.

Noam Chomsky, the public intellectual and radical dissident, and no friend to corporate America pointed out in a recent interview that skepticism about the COVID-19 vaccine is 'misplaced' adding that, 'If the information [regarding vaccine effectiveness] came from Pfizer and Moderna [only] there would be no reason to trust it, but it just happens that 100 per cent of health agencies

throughout the world and the vast majority of the medical profession and the health sciences accept the overwhelming evidence that vaccination radically reduces onset of infection and deaths.? For those who already mistrusted pharmaceutical companies prior to the pandemic they would dismiss the above statement as not true and write Chomsky off as being compromised because his statement stands in direct contradiction to their beliefs and to previous things Chomsky has written on corporate America. It has been said that the mark of an educated mind is the ability to entertain a thought without accepting it, but for some it seems, its enough to accept a thought without ever entertaining the evidence that does not support it.

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