

Fake News Occurs In Politics and Poison



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — February 2, 2017



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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently advised parents [to stop using and immediately discard certain homeopathic teething products for infants because they contain belladonna](#) [2], a toxic chemical in amounts that cannot be verified as safe. To medical professionals, this is no surprise. Despite the fact that many natural products contain harmful ingredients, the FDA has been playing catch-up ever since these “non-medical” products began to saturate the market after the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 was passed over the protests of the medical community, and allowed sale of almost anything with the disclaimer that it hasn't been verified by FDA.

For the public, understanding what is healthy and what isn't is often complicated marketing and media hype. As a result, time spent helping patients discern truth from fiction can surpass the time spent on other subjects during visits to the doctor. Throw Hollywood celebrities into the mix, and doctors spend increasing amounts of time debunking misleading or just plain false information about topics like vaccines, diet, parenting, vitamins and other products (to name a few).

For years, I've explained to patients and their families that not only do many of these homeopathic remedies have no proven health benefit, they are not tested for safety or effectiveness, nor are they always tested to ensure that the amounts of active ingredient in each dose are accurate, as was the case in this recent warning, with amounts of belladonna in some cases far exceeding the claim on the label. The fallacy that if something is natural, it must be safe is a perilous one. It turns out that some teething “remedies” contain belladonna—natural to be sure, but a poison nonetheless, and especially dangerous in higher doses.

For new parents, seeing their infant in pain is difficult (if not intolerable). But this makes parents especially vulnerable to believing claims that can have negative consequences. Throughout my years as a pediatrician, I've educated parents by presenting facts and debunking myths one conversation at a time. This takes time, communication, and caring, and it requires developing a relationship based on trust and an understanding of the shared priority of the child's best interest.

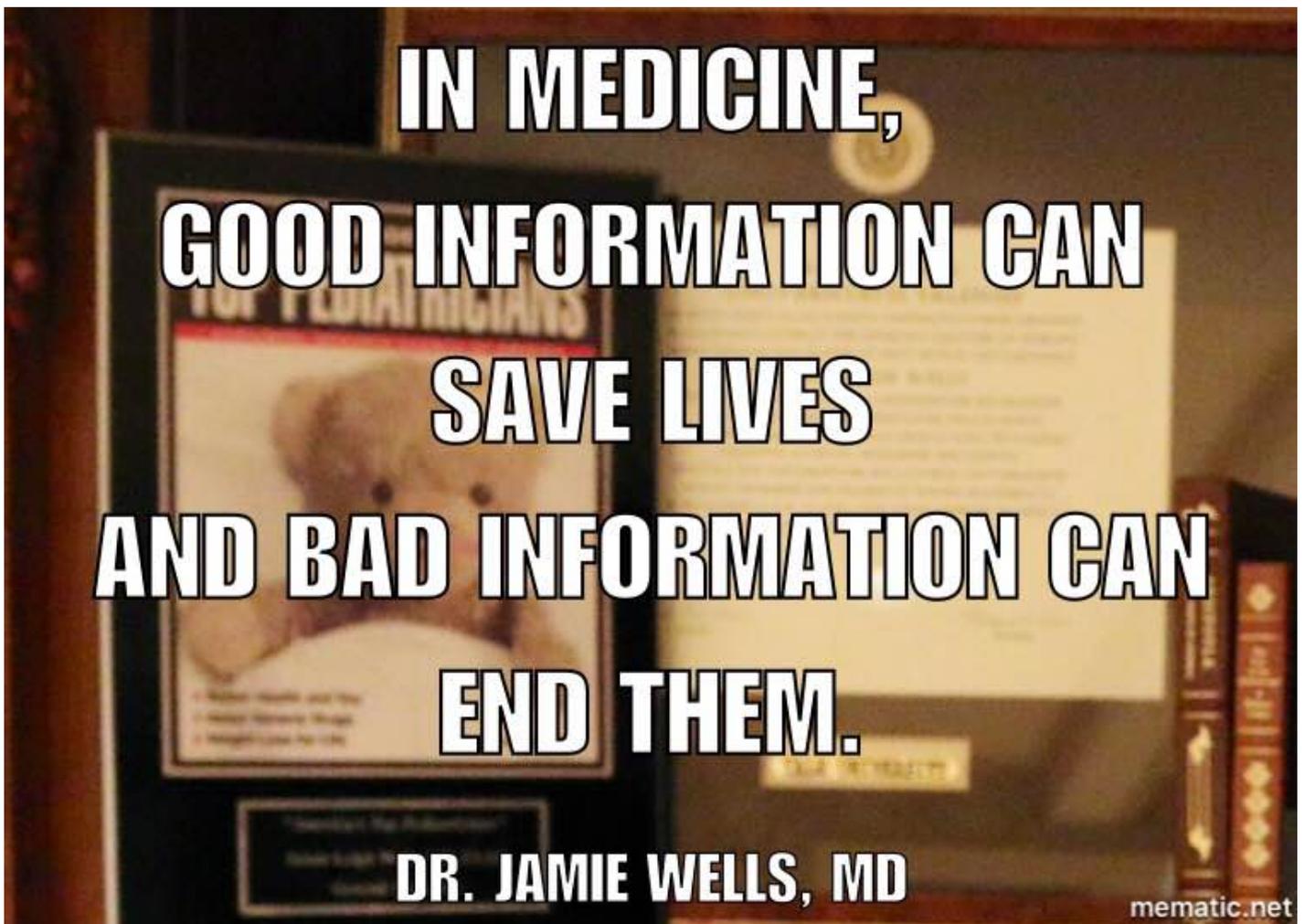
Time and candid discussions are precious commodities these days, but are vital to the dissemination of useful, accurate and valuable information.

In medicine, good information can save lives and bad information can end them.

In the age of the Internet and twenty-four hour news cycle, for some people "celebrity" seems to trump medical training. Debunking misleading information, half-truths, mischaracterizations, and outright false advertising has become increasingly necessary in the medical arena, and is now equally essential in the political one.

Consider why this is the case: Dialogue has become a thing of the past. Today, if we enter a political conversation with someone "on the other side," we typically have alternating monologues at best. Our arguments are unaffected by what we hear from those who disagree, and listening has become a mere pretense—just time to think of what to say next. On top of this, regardless of political affiliation, those with the most inflammatory rhetoric are given the spotlight. Hyperbole is king. Headlines are merely clickbait (and are often the only part of the article that is read). We only believe information that confirms what we already believe. Misinformation spreads like a poison.

In medicine as in research, facts are puzzle pieces. We continually reassess in order to adjust based on new information. We review all systems before rendering an opinion. We explore pertinent positives and negatives. We are guided by the dynamics of changing information to determine a diagnosis. We speak to other medical professionals, and after doing a thorough evaluation of all the data and comprehensive physical examination, we make a formal assessment and treatment plan—always guided by the tenet to do no harm.



Guessing about a patient based on information that is incomplete or unclear can be a disaster. That's why there are checks and re-checks to prevent avoidable errors. Medicine is a high-stakes game. The life-and-death reality of medical decisions is always present in a doctor's mind. But it is human nature to want a rapid turn-around, and doctors are often in the unenviable position of making patients and their families wait while they gather data in order to come to an informed opinion.

The poison in politics too

Short-term fixes and quick opinions are fast, but not necessarily correct, and that trajectory not only does harm, it is insidious and leads to further misinformation and the tendency to make bad decisions that have tangible consequences. This is unacceptable in science—and particularly in medical science. Yet somehow, in the political realm, it has become unacceptable to admit that one does not have enough data to land on an informed opinion. If the "right" knee-jerk reaction is not immediately forthcoming, name-calling and ostracizing is the new norm. No more *e pluribus unum*. Now it's *us against them*. Our level of certainty that we are right and the other side is wrong often far exceeds the "truth" that is revealed in the available data. Our partisan rhetoric is a powerful poison that infects the body politic and paralyzes the potential for collaboration and even discourse.

Perhaps in our political conversations we could lean more toward the medical ethic and do more examination of the data, more research, and more consulting with others whose opinions may be

different. More conversation and more ability to change our views when presented new information. Or if that's a bridge too far, we could at least allow each other the space to have (gasp!) *no opinion*.

In our climate of partisan hysteria, General Mattis's recent confirmation stands out as a welcome departure. With a vote of 98-1 (with Senator Sessions abstaining because of his upcoming Cabinet hearing), the confirmation speaks not only to the character and capacity of the General, but to the ability of our Senators to see beyond partisan politics and engage in the process with civility—a welcomed antidote to partisan venom.

NOTES:



My co-author, psychologist, [Pamela Paresky, PhD](#), ^[3] is an author, speaker, and Director of the Aspen Center for Human Development where she examines issues of leadership, happiness, the good life, and other topics in human development in collaboration with a faculty of scholars in diverse fields. She is also the Chief Research Officer to the CEO and President of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education. To follow her on twitter, [click here](#) ^[4].

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