Vaccines In The Media: Tucker Carlson Tosses Softballs At RFK Jr.

By Julianna LeMieux — July 13, 2017

News that Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was scheduled to appear on FOX News's show "Tucker Carlson Tonight" this week raised concerns among those of us who follow the anti-vaccine movement closely.

RFK Jr. is a well-known and long-time vocal skeptic of vaccines. Although he does not classify himself as an "anti-vaxxer" or someone who is against vaccinating their children, this is disingenuous. His actions tell a very different, and dangerous, story.

Based on his appearances at events, for example, one sponsored by Jenny McCarthy's organization Generation Rescue, Kennedy shows his real colors. Generation Rescue was founded on the false pretense that vaccines cause autism. Kennedy also met with President Trump to request further investigation of the safety of vaccines. His main talking point, and the subject of his book, is concern over the presence of thimerosal, the preservative that used to be routinely found in vaccines (and is now only found in multiple use flu vaccine vials). In no way is he a proponent of vaccines, now matter how he tries to disguise it. His crusade to share his views (fueled solely by his last name) have made him one of the faces of the growing anti-vaccine movement.

Any hope of a hard-hitting segment where Carlson challenged Kennedy's misguided vaccine beliefs by asking tough and pertinent questions was quickly dashed. Carlson could not have been more disappointing.
Since FOX News is mainstream media, they should be informed of the medical and scientific communities stance on vaccination (which is unwaveringly in favor). It seems strange that they would book a guest who is part of an anti-science fringe movement.

Even more concerning is the fact that this was RFK Jr.’s second appearance on the show. The first five-minute segment, which aired in April, was more of the same unsubstantiated claims and conspiracy theories.

On both segments, Carlson could have asked some tough questions and poked holes in Kennedy's logic, which would put him on the side of sound science. Alternatively, he could let RFK Jr. share his side of the topic, but, present the other side in a 'fair and balanced' manner by also having on a physician or someone who could have presented the scientific evidence.

Unfortunately, this is not what happened during either appearance.

Both times, Tucker Carlson was sympathetic and pathetic. He let RFK Jr. ramble about his non-supported beliefs (some bordering on conspiracy theories) on vaccination, throwing him one softball question after another. Worse still, he ended the segment by saying, “I don't know what the answer is, but I know what the questions ought to be and you will always have a place on this show to ask them.” Well, Tucker, that is only fair and balanced if, and only if, you have someone from the other side on as well. If you don't it's anti-vaccine propaganda.

So, I criticize the FOX network for having Kennedy on at all, giving him a forum to promote his dangerous ideas, but I am far more disappointed in Carlson. He was nothing more than a PR firm for Kennedy, and this is a disgrace. FOX is the most watched network on basic cable and of the millions of viewers who watched, some of them were unquestionably swayed by what they heard. Tucker Carlson has the ability to sway culture, and he made a choice to promote (or at the very least, not challenge) an anti-vaxxer. Carlson could not have done a worse job here.

Is this the direction that FOX news is going - having health quacks on as guests and not asking whether they have evidence to support their claims? Will I be writing about interviews with Joe Mercola and how beneficial turmeric is to the body?

The anti-vaxx movement has enough loud voices at the moment. Andrew Wakefield speaks at conventions, the movie VAXXED is shown at film festivals [2], and many pediatric chiropractic offices have been promoting an anti-vaccination mentality. Collectively, their voice is loud and is being heard by new parents every day. So, shame on FOX news for widening their audience and undoubtedly resulting in more unvaccinated children.

I hope that Carlson got what he wanted (I'm guessing it came in the form of ratings) and that it was worth a few more children getting sick with measles and dying of whooping cough.

References:

RFK Jr. on Tucker Carlson Tonight in April [3]

RFK Jr. on Tucker Carlson Tonight in July [4]