10 Biggest Junk Science Stories of 2017

By Alex Berezow, PhD — December 19, 2017

It's the season for Top 10 lists. The challenge, as usual, is to narrow down all the junk science we debunked in 2017 to just the ten best (worst?) stories. It would be far easier to create a top 100 list. (Actually, it would be even easier to create a top 193 list, which is what we did earlier this year with the publication of Little Black Book of Junk Science. You can download it for free.)

Bearing that fundamental limitation in mind, here are the ten biggest junk science stories of 2017.

Honorable Mentions

Five bizarre stories did not quite make the top 10. They receive honorable mentions:

(1) A history professor claims that carbon dioxide is a bigger threat to Syrians than sarin gas; (2) an "Earth Poet" claims that you can get "man boobs" from beer; (3) a couple who identifies as "breatharians" says they don't need material things like food and water because they can survive solely on the energy of the universe; (4) Gwyneth Paltrow's "Goop" goes global; and (5) "EMF truthers" keep insisting that cell phones and wi-fi cause cancer.

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#10. Nutella won't give you cancer. 2017 was another banner year for fake news. It seems that every breaking news story is followed up days or even hours later by a "correction" that entirely undermines the original reporting. The very same is true of science journalism, which promulgates just as much fake news as other outlets. Early in the year, multiple media sources reported that Nutella might cause cancer. It does not.

#9. A very fishy story about plastic is retracted. The predominant environmental narrative is
that plastic is evil. Therefore, any research which confirms that belief is not scrutinized particularly closely. That has finally backfired. A study that claimed to show that young fish prefer to eat plastic microbeads instead of regular food has been retracted [8] and the authors have been found guilty of scientific misconduct [9].

#8. The FDA calls "BS" on some medical marijuana claims. Snake oil salesmen would have you believe that marijuana can prevent or cure cancer. It cannot, and the FDA is cracking down on this nonsense [10]. While marijuana might be useful for treating pain (and reducing our dependence on opioids), there are few tangible health benefits. Whether marijuana should be legal for recreational use is an entirely separate issue.

#7. Netflix airs junk science documentaries. Netflix is great, assuming you aren't looking to be educated. The streaming video service refused to carry the pro-science documentary Food Evolution, which favorably (and accurately) described the science of GMOs. However, Netflix does carry anti-biotechnology "documentaries," [11] full of conspiracy theories about doctors, scientists, farmers, and the food supply.

#6. The media narrative on the opioid epidemic is deceiving. The media would have us believe that the opioid epidemic is primarily driven by greedy pharmaceutical companies and unethical doctors foisting medication on an unsuspecting public. That's a highly distorted view of the issue. From ignoring contradictory data to presenting misleading graphs, the media utilizes six deceptive tactics [12] in its portrayal of this complex issue.

#5. A naturopath injects turmeric into a patient and kills her. If you suffer from eczema, there are medications (such as hydrocortisone or triamcinolone) that can help treat it. Turmeric does not treat eczema, even though some naturopaths think it can. Instead, turmeric is just a spice that can be added to food. It is not medicine, and it does not perform miracles. Even if it did, the appropriate orifice for turmeric is your mouth, not your veins [13].

#4. Anti-fracking activists are puppets for Vladimir Putin. With all the concern about Russian meddling in America's election, one would think that people would be equally concerned about Russian meddling in American energy policy. But one would be wrong. A report issued by the Director of National Intelligence concluded that RT (the international, pro-Kremlin propaganda network) encourages Americans to be opposed to fracking [14] as a way of promoting Russian interests.

#3. Stephen Hawking continues to be wrong about almost everything. Stephen Hawking apparently has decided to spend the remainder of his career as a doomsday prophet [15]. Artificial intelligence. Climate change. Asteroids. Epidemics. Overpopulation. Electricity consumption. In Dr. Hawking's opinion, any one of these could wipe humanity off the face of the Earth, and hence, we should prepare to leave Earth within 100 years. He's wrong on all counts [16].

#2. UC-Irvine sells its soul for $200 million. $200 million is a lot of money. It's so much money, in fact, that some organizations would be willing to do anything for it. One such organization is UC-Irvine, who has accepted $200 million to promote alternative medicine [17] and other forms of pseudoscience.
#1. IARC-gate: A case of scientific fraud. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), the only major body to insist that glyphosate causes cancer, has been caught doctoring documents and manipulating evidence to support its conclusion. The motivation seems to be financial; one of IARC’s advisors is being paid by lawyers who stand to profit from potential lawsuits. This is a truly gigantic scandal [18] that has (predictably) received scant press coverage.