

A Picture Is Worth More Than A Thousand Words To The Trained Eye



By Jamie Wells, M.D. — November 29, 2018



Credit: Pixabay [1]

With the rapid pace of technology spreading a word or image globally in a matter of seconds, the old saying “a lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on” is ever the more relevant today. We are a quick assumption first, deal with the collateral damage of corrective action later culture. And it is to our detriment. This manifests in little to big ways.

Consider the version we present of ourselves on Facebook and social media, in general. Who posts their worst pictures? The online reality tends to be a pervasive highlight reel, not the meat and potatoes of life and the less glamorous bulk of the mundane. Omission in itself, intentional or not, foments an inaccurate to more demonstrably false narrative depending on the degree.

This alternate fidelity to adulterated truth contributes much to comparison living, a recipe for dissatisfaction and preoccupation with unmet expectations - too much of which can foster anxiety and depression.

As a medical doctor, especially one whose specialty emphasizes behavioral development, I am trained and particularly experienced in pattern recognition. A shift so subtle as a stance or position change, new hair style part or context in a solitary photo can alert a health professional of imminent divorce to just diagnosed disease.

Reconciling what I see throughout all representative channels, albeit traditional mainstream media to personal Instagram accounts, with an individual's right to privacy which I highly respect and am duty bound to uphold as a basic tenet of bioethical principles can pose unique challenges when weighed against the importance of honest dissemination of information in the realm of public health.

Fortunately, there are many ways to respect individual privacy and a person's autonomy to disclose as much or as little as they desire and clarify inconsistent and erroneous messages that get spread as a result. But, the most important method of achieving this often delicate dance is urging the reintroduction into our culture of critical thinking and reasoning. Accepting what is shown as is with spoon-fed consumption does not make for an informed participant in society.

When the words don't match the action, there is usually more to the story. The consequence of misunderstanding can be huge as a catalyst for negative chain reactions. Consider when a person with a new diagnosis sees a celebrity in interview upon interview touting he refused treatment for the condition and is cured. To the individual overwhelmed by grief of the loss of good health, the influence can truly be impactful and in a bad way. The illness is likely different, their stories are incompletely told and the famous person is free to give any bit of data they choose without independent verification.

Getting a complete story is the only route to being fully informed. Nuances and context matter. Rushing to judgment is sometimes necessary in an urgent situation where decisions need to be made on the limited data at hand. But, as a mainstay of conventional wisdom when we are talking about rushing to the press and not a life or death scenario, it is a misguided slippery slope often promulgating ideology not evidence.

Think about photos used showing bruises and scars. There are medical subtleties to the trained eye that can decipher their temporal course and etiology. To learn more, read [here](#) [2]. Reflexively sharing or re-tweeting some of these images to perpetuate a belief based on the emotion of upset from viewing a person in pain, without a deeper understanding of how it occurred can lead to a completely wrong understanding of the incident. If nations make intervention decisions without all of the facts about such an image, then the results can be catastrophic.

Sometimes a photo in the public domain can be much less nefarious. Consider the many birth announcements you see of proud grandparents or new parents posting their newborn. While the picture can touch viewers and bring smiles, to the medically trained eye the lens will focus on the IV line in the neonate that is not standard of care for an uneventful delivery. Though such a consideration can be for minor to major clinical reasons, the depiction extends beyond familial joy to issues regarding privacy of mother and infant. From pre-pregnancy to birth, mom and baby are symbiotic as baby's history is mom's history. So, without awareness, such a picture can be revealing not only of the infant's story but the mother's as well.

What's the lesson? Because many sayings are timeless for a reason, when it comes to being intellectually honest and learning "the devil is in the details."

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[1] <https://pixabay.com/en/magnifying-glass-forest-insect-hand-671858/>

[2] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2017/12/13/bruises-and-scars-tell-their-own-story-which-might-not-be-what-you-think-12281>