Most scientists would be flattered to have a celebrity endorse an article they wrote. However, if that celebrity is Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., the endorsement is tantamount to the kiss of death. If RFK, Jr. likes the article, it stands a higher risk of getting retracted.

RFK, Jr. is a proud and unrepentant anti-vaxxer. He was among the first high-profile figures claiming that vaccines cause autism. The claim was never widely accepted in the medical community and thoroughly debunked as early as 2002 by a paper in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Despite that, RFK, Jr. kept repeating the erroneous claim, which was based on a 1998 paper by Andrew Wakefield. In 2010, the paper was declared an "elaborate fraud" and retracted. (Wakefield's medical license also was revoked.) Retraction #1.

Even though the evidence was already decisive against the alleged vaccine-autism link, in 2005, RFK, Jr. wrote an essay (with the subtle title, "Deadly Immunity") for Rolling Stone and Salon, stoking fears over vaccines. In 2011, Salon retracted it. (I can't find the essay on Rolling Stone's website, so perhaps it was quietly removed.) Retraction #2.

Science writer Emily Willingham explains in Forbes that RFK, Jr. is a champion for William Thompson, the supposed "CDC whistleblower" who claims a vaccine-autism coverup. Both claim that data show that the risk of autism increased in vaccinated African-American boys. The only problem -- you guessed it! -- is the paper was retracted in 2014. Retraction #3.
If you thought this would give RFK, Jr. pause and perhaps introduce to him the concept of intellectual humility, you would be wrong. He also fancies himself an expert on agriculture, biotechnology, chemistry, epidemiology, and nutrition.

He recently tweeted an absolutely atrocious article in Scientific American that made a litany of absurd and unsubstantiated claims, the most egregious of which was that vegetables are becoming toxic, sugary snacks. Under tremendous pressure by the scientific community, the article was substantially re-written*. We'll call it Retraction #4.

Given that RFK, Jr. also believes that wi-fi and cell phones cause cancer, there are bound to be many more RFK-associated retractions in the future!

RFK, Jr. Is a Scourge on Public Health

Those who are willing to give RFK, Jr. the benefit of the doubt might claim that, misguided as he is, at least he is trying to do what he believes is right. Unfortunately, that doesn't pass muster. Here is what Martin Luther King, Jr. had to say about that in his excellent book Strength to Love:

"One day we will learn that the heart can never be totally right when the head is
totally wrong."

Indeed, RFK, Jr.’s head is so totally wrong that his own family rebuked him in an op-ed [10] in Politico. They write that “he is part of a misinformation campaign that’s having heartbreaking—and deadly—consequences.” Of course, he dismisses them. The mouth of fools poureth out folly.

Unless he has a miraculous change of mind and heart, RFK, Jr. will be remembered as a scourge on public health -- the Kennedy whose words and actions encouraged the spread of not only measles, mumps, and rubella but influenza and cervical cancer [11] as well. What a legacy.

*Note: The new article is still terrible and full of outright misinformation. As the late Dr. Charles Krauthammer would have said [12], it has been downgraded from “execrable to merely appalling.”

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