Paranoid much? You have plenty of company

By ACSH Staff — March 19, 2014

As a group that deals with medical misinformation virtually every day, we at ACSH (falsely) believed that we were inured from the worst scientific and medical garbage out there.

We are sorry to say that even we miscalculated the capacity of the American public to fall victim to the most idiotic conspiracy theories.

You’ve probably heard most of them before, but the number of Americans that actually believe in one or more of these theories half of the country is disturbing on many levels.

A study conducted by J. Eric Oliver, Ph.D., and colleagues of the University of Chicago, which was published in the latest JAMA Internal Medicine maintains that people may believe in conspiracy theories because they're easier to understand than complex medical information.

This can’t be good.

Oliver says, "Science in general - medicine in particular - is complicated and cognitively challenging because you have to carry around a lot of uncertainty. To talk about epidemiology and probability theories is difficult to understand as opposed to 'if you put this substance in your body, it's going to be bad.'"

That is putting it mildly, says ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom, whose 2013 piece, Drowning in Morons in Medical Progress Today is considerably less polite about addressing conspiracy theories.

He continues, There is a perfect storm of mis- and disinformation out there. Between an appalling lack of logic and outright lies perpetuated by those with a vested interest in keeping people ignorant, the screwball theories become increasingly appealing.

For example, 69 percent of respondents said that they had heard that vaccines cause autism, although only 20 percent agreed with this. (For an excellent cartoon that thoroughly explains and exposes the Wakefield fraud that led to the autism-vaccine link, see this.)

What kind of other conspiracies are out there? You’ve probably heard of most of them: The
creation and use of HIV to wipe out the black population, putting fluoride in water in order to (you
name it), and government regulators suppressing natural cures in order to prop up the evil drug
companies at the expense of the altruistic supplements industry.

Dr. Bloom, who spent years doing oncology research, comments on his personal favorite. It goes
something like this: Drug companies actually have a cure for cancer, but are withholding it so they
can continue to sell expensive, toxic and ineffective chemotherapy drugs, which he described as
mind-boggling idiocy, only because he could not think of anything more acerbic to say. He went
on, If cancer cures were available, does it really make any sense to think that 100,000 researchers
would keep it quiet? Or that they or the leaders of the drug companies wouldn t want to use it? Or
any company that happened to have such a drug wouldn t be selling it, which would be a license
to print money? No cancer is not curable. It s simply a very difficult problem.

An interesting, but not surprising offshoot of this trend involves the use of dietary supplements.
Conspiracy believers were almost three times as likely to take supplements as non-believers.

Let s give a decade-late round of applause to Senator Orrin Hatch, of Utah, whose Orwellian-
sounding law, The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, has enabled the
supplement industry a great deal of which exists in his home state to sell unregulated drugs under
the guise of considering them to be essentially foods. The only thing wrong with this law is that it
lacks three letters mis as in Misinformation Act of 1994.

So, between mistrust of modern medicine and drug companies, some of it deserved a lack of
scientific acumen in this country a bunch of naive and misinformed consumers at the mercy of
clever hucksters, it is not too surprising to expect a certain amount of this. But the actual amount is
disturbing indeed.

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