Grading GOP Debaters on Vaccines: Dunce Caps Aplenty

By Josh Bloom — September 17, 2015

Here at the American Council on Science and Health, we meticulously avoid politics, and it's no accident. It makes perfect sense: Science, in its purest form, is a quest for the truth. But the essence of politics is lying well, maybe even without getting caught. And, even if you do get caught, it probably doesn't matter, since lying is part of the job description.

Hence, our mission is, by definition, incompatible with political discussion or debate.

This, however, does not mean that if public figures, elected or not, are using the soapbox to spread bad science or medicine, that we won't go after them. And we do so emphatically, since the bigger the audience that an individual commands, the more harm they can do.

This is why we regularly go after people like Dr. Oz, The Food Babe, Joe Mercola, RFK Jr., and the like. By virtue of their celebrity, they have big audiences (although, in the "really, really cool news" department, as we pointed out earlier this week, Dr. Oz has lost half his television audience[1], something that we at the Council can proudly take partial credit for).

Speaking of large audiences, Wednesday night's GOP debate drew an estimated 20 million viewers[2]. One issue that was discussed involved mandatory vaccination; our radar kicked in. What a great topic for the Council to evaluate while remaining apolitical and the candidates that participated did not disappoint.

Three discussed vaccines, so bottom line, how did they fare on a purely scientific basis? Pretty awful, for a variety of reasons. Here are their quotes from the debate, followed by our comments and report-card grade:

1. Donald Trump
Autism has become an epidemic. Twenty-five years ago, 35 years ago, you look at the statistics, not even close. It has gotten totally out of control. Trump continues to perpetuate the myth that there is any link whatsoever between vaccination and autism. It has long been not only disproven, but has been shown to be an elaborate fraud [3] that was committed by (the former) Dr. Andrew Wakefield for the sole purpose of financial gain.

- "I am totally in favor of vaccines"

He has a strange way of demonstrating this. Keep reading.

- "But I want smaller doses over a longer period of time"

This remark states explicitly that spreading out vaccination is safer, and implicitly states that there is a higher risk of "too many vaccines at once." We'll go with vaccine world expert, and former Council trustee Dr. Paul Offit, the chief of infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia on this one [4]:

Dr. Offit: "A single bacteria has between 2000 and 6000 immunological components. The total number of immunological components of all 14 [vaccines] given in the first years of life [5] is maybe 160. It's nothing. It's a literal drop in the ocean of what you encounter. If you were overwhelmed by vaccines you would not survive, given the trivial immunological challenge it is compared to what you encounter every day."

Trump claimed that he's in favor of vaccines, but essentially nullified this entire position by virtue of his factually incorrect statements.

Grade F

2. Dr. Ben Carson

- Well, let me put it this way. There has there have been numerous studies, and they have not demonstrated that there is any correlation between vaccinations and autism.

This is factually correct, but is wishy-washy to the point where it is misleading. Any listener could easily and mistakenly take away the following message: "There are no studies SO FAR that have demonstrated any correlation between vaccination and autism."

Dr. Carson said nothing wrong, but more important is what he did not say. He had the opportunity to make the facts clear, using his status as a physician, but chose to hedge his bets.

Grade C

(Grade as a physician F. Dr. Carson knows extremely well that the autism-vaccine connection is utter nonsense. If he's your pediatrician and makes the same statement, it is time to get another pediatrician. Shame on him.)

3. Dr. Rand Paul

- "One of the greatest one of the greatest medical discoveries of all times was were the vaccines, particularly for smallpox. And if you want to read a story, it's called The Speckled Monster, it's an amazing story, it was all done voluntary"
He concedes that the smallpox vaccine was an historic milestone in history. For the rest, he may as well be talking about the Cookie Monster for all the sense it makes.

- "But people came in by the droves. George Washington wouldn't let his wife visit until she got vaccinated"

I have no interest in the marital dynamics of the Washingtons.

- "So I'm all for vaccines. But I'm also for freedom"

Those could be the least meaningful 10 words in the history of Western civilization. If this means anything, please let me know.

- "I'm also a little concerned about how they're bunched up. My kids had all of their vaccines, and even if the science doesn't say bunching them up is a problem, I ought to have the right to spread out my vaccines out a little bit at the very least"

Dr. Paul is concerned about "bunching up" his kids' vaccine, even though he knows that the science does not support his decision. Worse still, he frames this as a libertarian issue, when it is nothing of the sort.

Paul did not say a single word that was anything but evasive. If he had three sides of his mouth, he would have talked out of all three at once.

**Grade N** (for no message whatsoever)

(Grade as physician C+. Dr. Paul at least acknowledged that vaccines are a good idea, even though he's mistaken about the spacing. Unlike Dr. Carson, he did not suggest that there might be even the slightest validity of the vaccine-autism connection. He did not mention this at all.

In summary, here are the three conclusions I came away with:

1. Trump is dead wrong and ignorant.
2. Dr. Carson knows the truth, but lacked the courage to speak it.
3. Dr. Paul said nothing, but at least he used a lot of words to say it.

Write-in ballot anyone?