Joe Mercola Hits a New Low Saying Zika Is Caused By Vitamin A Deficiency

By Josh Bloom — August 17, 2016

"Zika: Brazil Admits It's Not the Virus"

You have just witnessed a perfect example of how snake oil salesmen, quacks, and other unsavory individuals twist both words and science to promote their agendas, agendas which often involve selling products and supplements to the people they just scared about science and medicine.

The seven words above have the potential to cause real harm for people who make the mistake of falling for the chicanery that comes to us courtesy of the reliably unreliable internet supplement huckster Joe Mercola. Mercola, who is arguably the worst of the worst in the supplement sales space, has really outdone himself this time. His attention-grabbing headline, as well as the nonsense hyperbole masquerading as science that follows it, are both false and dangerous. Shame on him. Especially now.

That headline appears in an August 16th article on Mercola's site. His message is clear: Zika is not responsible for the thousands of birth defects that are appearing across South (and now, North) America.

Mercola wants to raise doubt that Zika is causing birth defects, but is shrewd enough not to say so directly and open himself up to more (the FDA has monitored him closely ever since he got a warning for claiming a camera he sells could screen for cancer) legal action. Rather, he takes pieces of quotes out of context and exaggerates them, throws in a bunch of irrelevant facts, and uses innuendo and misdirection to imply that other culprits such as pesticides, and vitamin A and zinc deficiencies are to blame (1).

This is a lie, and a very reckless one at that. But don't take my word for it, let's examine his claims together, and then perhaps we can all ponder how he is able to sleep at night.

The title itself is a lie: "Zika: Brazil Admits It's Not the Virus," which Mercola immediately contradicts in the first sentence of the article (emphasis mine): "Zika alone may not be responsible for the rise in birth defects that plagued parts of the country."

So, has Brazil really "admitted" that it's not the virus, or could there be unknown co-factors that are contributing to microcephaly? These cannot both be true. The answer, of course, is the latter, which should make you wonder why Mercola is being intentionally deceptive. The answer: this is
the way he gets money from people.

Here are other examples of how Mercola twists words in order to make his point.

“Dr. Fatima Marinho, director of information and health analysis at Brazil's ministry of health, told the journal Nature, 'We suspect that something more than Zika virus is causing the high intensity and severity of cases.'”

Mercola is portraying Dr. Marinho as someone who is either not confident of the causative pathogen, attaches great importance to other factors, or both. This is not true, as we will see. But first, here he quote-mines again.

“[Dr. Marinho stated,] but we didn’t find this in other states – even the [adjacent] states didn’t see the same situation as in the epicentre…. We were preparing for an explosion and it didn't come.”

This is an obvious attempt to suggest that, since the epidemic isn't behaving as "expected," the entire Zika-microcephaly theory must be flawed, or just plain wrong. And, if microcephaly is not caused by the virus, then it must be caused by something else.

Mercola conveniently left out part of what Dr. Marinho said: (emphasis mine)

“We know here Zika caused neurological damage – we have no doubt – but the question is how can we explain this situation in the epicentre that was not reproduced in other areas – in Colombia, and in other states in Brazil. A lot of pregnant women were infected and there were few cases of microcephaly or congenital malformation – it must be more than Zika itself...We could be wrong of course but it is the responsibility of the Ministry of Health to investigate all possibilities.”

In other words, Zika is responsible for microcephaly, but the patterns of infection and neurological damage are not predictable. Dr. Marinho postulates that there could be other factors, such as a second pathogen, and that this possibility must be investigated. That's reasonable, but there is no evidence of a co-factor, so it is just speculation at this point. There are pieces to this puzzle that do not yet, (and may never) fit together, but is Brazil admitting that "It's Not the Virus?"

No—quite the opposite.

Next, the premier peddler of supplement distributors uses these manufactured (and far fetched) uncertainties to launch into a litany of other outlandish alternatives:
“Environmental pollution and toxic pesticide exposure have been positively linked to a wide array of adverse health effects, including birth defects.”

“Most of the women who gave birth to babies with microcephaly were poor and lived in small cities or on the outskirts of big cities.”

“In addition, the outbreak occurred in a largely poverty-stricken agricultural area of Brazil that uses large amounts of banned pesticides.”

“Between these factors and the lack of sanitation and widespread vitamin A and zinc deficiency, you have the basic framework for an increase in poor health outcomes among newborn infants in that area.”

“Environmental pollution and toxic pesticide exposure have been positively linked to a wide array of adverse health effects, including birth defects.”

“Vitamin A deficiency has been linked to an increased risk of microcephaly.”

None of these statements holds up to scrutiny even as badly correlational. Not one. Zika was identified as the cause of microcephaly in a May 19th special report in The New England Journal of Medicine, and The World Health Organization agrees with this.

Nor do any of Mercola’s assertions about timing or demographics make any sense.

There were fewer than 150 cases of microcephaly in Brazil in all of 2014. The first locally transmitted case of Zika in Brazil occurred in May 2015. There are now 4,000 cases in the country. By January 2016, 24 countries had active transmission of the virus. The virus is now actively spreading in more than 60 countries.

Insecticides, which have been in use for 70 years, didn’t suddenly start getting exponentially poisonous over the course of one year. Insecticides? Please. This is an infectious disease epidemic.

Neither wealth nor poverty are relevant. Almost all of the 2,000 people in the United States who are infected became so during travel, such as vacations and business trips. These people were neither poor nor malnourished, and they do not live in areas with inadequate sanitation. Neither do the women in the US who became infected from unprotected sex, nor the 20+ people in the artsy Wynwood section of Miami, who caught the virus from mosquitoes.

Nor did the environment of the entire 5,000 miles that span Mexico through Argentina decline in one year to the point where it created thousands of birth defects. It’s patently ridiculous.

But, of all the nonsense Mercola puts forward, none of it is dumber than his claim that vitamin A deficiency may be the cause. The graphic below demonstrates this in no uncertain terms. On the left is a map of active Zika area in the Americas, as of August 11th. The map on the right shows areas of the world where vitamin A deficiency is endemic. Could these two possibly look more
different? No—vitamin A has nothing whatsoever to do with Zika-related birth defects—something that Mercola could have found out by spending five minutes researching.

Left: Countries with active transmission of Zika, August 2016. Source: CDC

Right: Vitamin A deficiency worldwide (2014). Source: 12.000.scripts.mit.edu

It's just one crazy theory and bogus solution after another. But, Mercola's message here is not merely self-serving. It is a recipe for disaster for anyone who listens to him.

Notes:

(1) Not surprisingly, Mercola sells zinc supplements [6].

(2) Organophosphate pesticides, which are now being used in South Florida, were first used as insecticides in the 1940s.