

Honing Information and Research Literacy in the “Fake News” Era

Caroline Bowen AM PhD CPSP, Speech-Language Pathologist, Macquarie University, Australia

The rampant distribution of fake health and lifestyle news, and pseudoscientific advice concerning human development and disorders, including developmental disorders (WHO, 2016), is insidious, deceptive and potentially dangerous (Bowen & Snow, 2017). The spread of this misinformation is particularly apparent on the internet now that over 50% of the world’s population has access to it, and almost 43% (3.1 billion people) engage in social media (ITU, 2017). Half-truths, spin and conspiracy theories around public health issues (e.g., HPV and MMR vaccination; nutrition), conditions (e.g., cancer; HIV) and disorders (e.g., autism spectrum disorder; intellectual disability) are often distributed more widely on the web than evidence-based reports from high quality peer reviewed journals and reputable news organisations. For instance, of the 20 most-shared articles on Facebook in 2016 with “cancer” in the headline, over half reported claims discredited by doctors and health authorities or, in the case of the year’s top story—directly by the legitimate researchers misrepresented in the article (Forster, 2017). Worryingly, comparable disinformation emanates from ostensibly conservative, trusted sources too.

Inevitably, the tension between science and pseudoscience generates concern and action among three important groups of social media “influencers”. First, responsible academic and mass media publishers and journalists; second, bona fide health and education academics and practitioners from disciplines that include allied health, dentistry, medicine, nursing, psychology, rehabilitation science, and teaching; and third, advocates for people with a disability, including parents. In their various ways, they shoulder the challenge of countering pseudoscience while asserting the need for better information and research literacy, and regard for evidence-based practice (EBP).

In this talk, Dr Bowen draws on Bowen, Snow, & Brandon (expected 2021) comparing the characteristics of scientific versus pseudoscientific “therapies”; exploring the threats to practice, the professions, clients and the community posed by fad interventions for children and young people with developmental disorders, and their families; emphasising research literacy and information literacy; and proposing responses to and remedies for ethical dilemmas around pseudoscience in everyday practice.

References

- Bowen, C. & Snow, P. (2017; second edition in progress for 2022). *Making Sense of Interventions for Children with Developmental Disorders: A Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Guildford: J&R Press.
- Bowen, C., Snow, P., & Brandon, P. (in preparation for 2021). *The Developmental Disorders Roadmap: Helping Children and Young People with Developmental Disorders at Home, at School, and Beyond*. Guildford: J&R Press.
- Forster, K. (2017). Revealed: How dangerous fake health news conquered Facebook. *The Independent*, Retrieved September 18, 2019 from <https://www.independent.co.uk/>
- International Telecommunication Union: ITU (2017). ICT Facts and Figures 2017, *Telecommunication Development Bureau*, Retrieved September 18, 2019 from <https://www.itu.int/en/Pages/default.aspx>
- World Health Organisation (2016). *International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems*, 10th Revision: Version 2016 (ICD-10). Geneva: WHO.