HOW TO... Spot Medical

ISINFORMA

IN THE PANDEMIC

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ADVICE

Brian Eggo and colleagues from Skeptics in the Pub give some practical guidance on how to ensure you aren't misled by unfounded claims in the media.

he internet has revolutionised society in ways that could scarcely have been imagined just a few decades ago. There's a vast ocean of information to dive into and explore - and it's only a click away. Unfortunately, that ocean is badly polluted. It puts us in a difficult position when it comes to figuring out what we should believe, and how that informs our actions, particularly when it comes to matters of health.

The good news is that the warning signs can be relatively easily spotted in most cases. The bad news is that we're in the middle of a global pandemic, so we're scared, we're grieving and we're desperate.

Add to that some information-overload and we have a perfect cocktail of confusion to lead you to making

Prudence with proclamations

Many countries across the world have varied their approach to tackling COVID-19. Some are due to factors such as population density, cultural norms, or infrastructure. It's no surprise, however, that some of the worst-hit countries are those where the leaders don't pay appropriate attention to the advice of the scientific community. Whatever your politics, it never hurts to question your Government's wisdom.

Peruse problematic press

there's a conflict of interest between accurately reflecting findings, and garnering public interest. In addition, accuracy is diluted as the conclusions of a study become a press release, then a news story, (with attention-grabbing headline). This is exacerbated by the unprecedented thirst we have for new data in the middle of a pandemic. As such, you should be extra cautious about what you read. It's prudent to delve behind the headlines and go to the source, and to wait and see what the rest of the scientific community has to say about it before making a judgment.

Critique claims carefully

A claim to cure anything (particularly a virus like COVID-19) should always set off

ABOUT SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

Skeptics in the Pub is an informal community which promotes scientific scepticism, reason, and critical thinking. There are many groups across the UK, and across the globe that run regular lectures and social events, usually in some form of drinking establishment. During lockdown restrictions we are collaborating to host online talks every Thursday at 7pm GMT. To find out more about us, visit https://sitp.online

of scientific scepticism and critical thinking skills. To help you

bad decisions. As a remedy, here we

prescribe a healthy dose

on your way, here are our top tips for spotting questionable health claims.

Give panaceas a pass

In simplest possible terms, cure-alls cure nothing. The longer the list of conditions that something claims to treat, the less likely it is to do anything. It should set off your sceptical spider senses even more if an alternative health treatment that has been around for some time is proclaimed as a cure for a new disease.

Beware of biases

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The human brain is amazing, but flawed. All of our cognitive shortcomings are further fuelled by social media algorithms, which are considerably more likely to push content in your direction that fits your worldview. With this in mind, some self-reflection and humility about your own shortcomings will serve you well. Be extra cautious of claims

[≦] that fit comfortably with your worldview.

Science communication is difficult, and

alarm bells, as it's highly unlikely. If you hear [miracle cure x] kills [disease y] in a petri dish it sounds impressive, but is almost entirely meaningless (napalm will kill cancer cells, but we wouldn't advise it for a tumour). Claims to treat or mitigate the effects of a disease are more common. We're learning more about severe cases of COVID-19, but still have a long way to go. Anything that claims to be able to treat it right now should be met with the utmost scepticism.

Be pharma-logical

There's a constant campaign by proponents of alternative medicine to try and discredit mainstream medical practices. Any time you see the term "big pharma" being used, it's usually paired with an attempt to sell some snake oil, or perhaps talk you out of vaccinating your children. Let's be very clear though, while pharmaceutical companies are not driven by altruism, that shouldn't fool you into thinking that everything they do is bad, or that the alternative medicine on offer would be of any use. Be reasonable and balanced in your approach.

Separate pseudoscience from science

Pseudoscience has the look and feel of legitimate science - it can even appear in studies published in peer-reviewed journals. In the case of medical

interventions, there are legitimate health professionals who genuinely believe and actively promote pseudoscience. Fortunately, there are almost always some red flags that can be spotted with a little investigation, and the above points

will help you along the way with that.

In conclusion

The waters are murky, but a little bit of critical thinking will provide some much-needed illumination. Be careful what you believe, and look out for your family and friends, too.