

Newsletter 29: The Media and 'False Balance' in the Vaccination Debate

Re Vaccination is a plausible cause of autism

(July 2013)

On the 1st October 2012 the ABC's MediaWatch presented a segment titled '*False Balance Leads to Confusion*'. This was in reference to the debate on the possible link between autism and the childhood vaccination schedule. In this program the presenter, Jonathon Holmes stated: '*...the claim about the medical literature linking vaccination and autism is pure, unadulterated baloney.*'

This comment was the presenter's 'opinion' and it is not factually correct. The scientific literature provides overwhelming evidence that it is possible for the combination of childhood vaccines that are recommended by governments to be a cause of autism and other chronic illness in children. This is the reason why I have been providing you with this researched information from a university for the past 5 years.

It would not be necessary for researchers and parents to bring you this science if the government was providing all the evidence on this issue. But the government is not providing all the evidence and it is selecting out the consumer voice and perspective on the risks of this medical procedure. The comments made by Jonathon Holmes on MediaWatch are presented in the link below [1].

In November 2012 I made a complaint to the Australian Communication and Media Authority (ACMA) that MediaWatch had presented factual inaccuracies on this scientific issue and had not demonstrated impartiality in reporting it. This is a very important health topic and it is critical that the public receives accurate information. The ACMA investigated the complaint and found that MediaWatch *did not* breach the accuracy and impartiality code *because presenting this science would provide 'false balance to the debate'*. Link [2] below.

The media has a duty to debate all the science otherwise claims can be made by selecting out the science that doesn't suit a desired outcome. It is also possible that the 'weight of evidence' is due to a 'lack of scientific evidence' and not 'actual scientific evidence'. This can

occur if the government has not funded the correct scientific studies to determine causality. If the correct studies with appropriate parameters have not been funded then it is not possible to prove or disprove a causal link.

In this MediaWatch segment the information presented by Jonathon Holmes amounted to propaganda. This is because the presenter told the public that the possibility that autism is caused by vaccination is 'baloney' and 'bullshit' – which is untrue and was his *opinion* not scientific evidence.

The Institute of Medicine claimed in 2001 that vaccines were a plausible cause of autism but stated in 2004 that studies had not proved that vaccines caused autism. In addition, Jonathon Holmes in MediaWatch incorrectly described members of the Australian Vaccination Network as “an obsessively anti-vaccination pressure group that’s immunised itself against the effect of scientific evidence.’ Again this is untrue and it is clear that Holmes has not researched this topic and is again providing factually incorrect information. This is a consumer group who is requesting that all vaccines remain the free choice of the individual without being tied to welfare benefits or school entry. Public health policies should be promoted on the scientific evidence - not financial incentives and fear of infectious diseases.

There is no scientific consensus on the safety of vaccines and Jonathon Holmes has presented propaganda with his spin and unsupported statements about this important health issue. It is clear that the government is not providing the public with open and transparent science about vaccination and now there is evidence from the ACMA that the media is no longer required to report the science about the risks of vaccination. This is occurring because authorities are being informed that this would be ‘false balance’ in a scientific issue – a fallacious argument. All the science must be open for scrutiny in scientific debates and if the weight of evidence is on one-side of the debate then this evidence can be provided to the public in support of the arguments.

It should be noted that the Council for Media Integrity was established in Australia in 1996 by the Australian Skeptics. This organisation is not a scientific organisation and the establishment of this group in Australia was assisted by members of a similar organisation in the USA. The goal of this lobby group is to influence public behaviour through the media and social websites. There are many subscribers of the Skeptic’s in Australia who have been

discrediting academic researchers on scientific topics and placing misinformation about vaccines on the internet and in the mainstream media.

This Australian Skeptics lobby groups have many subscribers who are not demonstrating integrity in academic debate and the strategies they are using have been described here <http://vaccinationdecisions.net/lobby-groups/>

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1. Jonathon Holmes comments on Media Watch <http://vaccinationdecisions.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Jonathon-Holmes-Mediawatch-program-titled-Measles-false-balance-exposed-130116.pdf>
2. Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) Report <http://vaccinationdecisions.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ACMA-Final-Report-2976-May-2013.pdf>