KILLING THE MESSENGER

In historic times, the bearer of bad news was in danger of personal demise, as anger at the message was displaced on to the messenger. In 1898, Christy noted the maxim "Messengers should neither be beheaded nor hanged". In the present age such behaviour would not be tolerated but the underlying tendency towards expressing displeasure towards those bringing unwelcomed information may still persist.

A recent article on "Putting Yiamouyiannis into Perspective" appears to focus on the status of John Yiamouyiannis as a serious research worker or commentator on health policy with the suggestion that his work be regarded with considerable scepticism. He is seen to use deception by omission, references which do not support his claims, to be associated with an organization which was a front for promoters of unproved remedies, eccentric theories and quackery, to have had political ambitions and have taken the role of propagandist rather than serious scientist so that his hostility to fluoridation has obscured his scientific judgement. The article suggests that the simple truth is that there is no scientific controversy over the safety of fluoridation. The underlying theme of the article could thus be seen to be "character assassination" rather than a critique of a particular argument.

George Waldbott, a founding member of the International Society for Fluoride Research, noted that he became the subject of a dossier in which he was accused of intellectual dishonesty and incompetence. The dossier became part of a brochure, "Comments on the opponents of fluoridation", which was published twice by the Bureau of Public Information of the American Dental Association. Waldbott considered that the dossier was circulated widely when he raised his voice against fluoridation. Although he described the use of double-blind methodology to test for adverse reactions to fluoride, he has been reported to have admitted under cross-examination in 1982 to have not carried out double-blind studies but to have relied instead on personal intuition.

In the debate on fluoridation prior to the referendum in October 1995 in Timaru, New Zealand, reference to the work of Waldbott was seen to represent a "clasp at yet another straw in the desperate attempt to find, this time, a cause and effect relationship between fluoridation and allergy". The author, a public health official, stated that Waldbott "admitted under cross-examination that he had no research training and that his studies were not double blind but relied on personal intuition", and saw that opinion of the researcher rather than a reasoned critique of the research as reason for dismissing the studies.

Leon Festinger in his theory of cognitive dissonance, suggests that two cognitive elements are in a dissonant relation if, considering these two alone, the obverse of one element follows from the other. The presence of dissonance is seen to give rise to pressures to reduce that dissonance. Dissonance introduced by disagreement expressed by other persons may be reduced by changing one's own opinion, by influencing the others to change their opinion, and by rejecting
those who disagree. The other person can be made, in some manner, not comparable to oneself. One can attribute different characteristics, experiences, or motives to the other person or one can even reject him and derogate him. If one person believes that flying saucers are space ships from other planets and some other person voices the opinion that flying saucers, as such, do not even exist, the resulting dissonance in the cognition of the former may be reduced if he can believe that the latter is a stupid, ignorant, unfriendly, and bigoted individual. Festinger indicates that it sometimes happens that a large group of people is able to maintain an opinion or belief even in the face of continual definite evidence to the contrary. He notes that groups of scientists have been known to continue to believe in certain theories, supporting one another in this belief in spite of mounting evidence that these theories are incorrect. Thus it is possible for reality to be denied and personal attacks be made on the character of those presenting alternative incompatible viewpoints.

The effects of fluoride are multiple and complex. In order for a consensus to emerge on these the debate needs to focus on the evidence rather than on the character of those producing the evidence.

References

Bruce Spittle

I know that most men, including those at ease with problems of the greatest complexity, can seldom accept even the simplest and most obvious truth if it be such as would oblige them to admit the falsity of conclusions which they have delighted in explaining to colleagues, which they have proudly taught to others, and which they have woven, thread by thread, into the fabric of their lives.

Leo Tolstoy