

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Celebrities and COVID vaccines

As we stagger out of the pandemic jungle and stroll into the endemic coronavirus pastures, the human fault and conceit of hindsight clarity and wisdom is on full display – what should have been done, what should not have been done – if only it were me in charge.

The mainstream strategy was, and still is, straightforward: disease mitigation to protect scarce resources for the sick and to prevent infection transmission using public health measures until the population can be vaccinated. Mitigation strategy takes into account not only hospital resources and coronavirus complications but pandemic-associated mental illness and addictions, complications and death from delayed diagnosis of other diseases, as well as some protection of the essential economy.

In Western Canada, our public health officials, particularly Drs. Deena Hinshaw and Bonnie Henry in Alberta and B.C. respectively, have risen to the task admirably and with aplomb. In fact, they almost reached celebrity status (especially Dr. Henry in B.C. with her personal Fluevog “Dr. Henry shoe”) until the nature of the job necessitated conveying unpopular advice that some people did not want to hear.

The mainstream media, as expected, has greatly contributed to the confusion regarding rules to be followed since that seems to be their job – to find and interview people who disagree with each other, all claiming to “follow the science” – whatever their qualifications and size of public support.

We’re all part-sheep – some a lot more ungulate than others. Ruminating on this, it does explain the ease with which people can be manipulated at least for a while by distorting words to carry new connotations or even denotations – “science” for politicians now means “my opinion because I say I’m following the science.”



Some 10-20% of people have serious trypanophobia - fear of needles (photo credit: Triggermouse, Pixabay.com)

Persuading people to do things they don't want to do

Persuading people to do things they don't want to do requires that they must be first convinced of the seriousness of a threat (usually conveyed by experts) and the message of what to do must then be spread by a cohort of what the pharmaceutical industry (when they are selling drugs) calls "influencers." During a pandemic our influencers are leaders and, crucially, celebrities.

In ancient Greece, as a member of the *hoi polloi* (the common folk, not the elite as the term now mistakenly means) you were allowed to ascribe any unexpected event to the intercession of a deity or a deity's acolyte. Thus an awkward and unexpected delay while walking home by the river was reasonably ascribed to a well-known river goddess – an early celebrity.

The Roman elites built on this to turn their leaders into demigods by simple proclamation: "Claudius, you wanna become a god? We can make that happen."

We part-sheep humans have evolved in the 21st century towards trusting the best-looking, best-dressed and most fashionable person who has the ability to attract attention to themselves, amplified by an eager media. This need to vest one's fellows with some ineffable, quasi-divine properties has drawn its chair up to the fire and morphed comfortably into the modern "celebrity." Why this fascination with celebrity? Because there's an illusion that by your connection, a bit of celeb dust sprinkles on you. In short, what celebs tweet, say and do counts – including attitudes to vaccination and vaccine "hesitancy."

Modern celebrities are expert at image and self-promotion – either through their physical characteristics or their noticeability. Celebrities become fonts of wisdom: Robert De Niro on the oil sands, Rosie O'Donnell on diet, Suzanne Somers on cancer therapy ... and Donald Trump on politics. Their connection to the rank and file is the root source of a celebrity's influence. And each generation has its favorite celebs.

Mitigation strategy depends on getting everyone possible vaccinated and enlisting the help of those demigods, the celebrities.

From my days when I was a partner in a small film group, I've had my brush with celebrities – usually minor. But not always.

In the early eighties, I arrived at Panorama ski resort late in the afternoon on a sunny day in March, grabbed skis and bought a late afternoon ticket.

It was the days before the four-seater ski lift, only a T-bar to the top. A woman had moved onto the T-bar – smart violet outfit, hood up with fur lining, ski goggles on. I was in the singles line impatient to get skiing, so I slid in beside her.

She wasn't happy with my uninvited move but with T-bars, once it starts moving, trying to get off at the bottom is much worse than staying the course.

"I'm not good on this thing," she said.

"You look as if you're an ace skier," I said. "You've got all the gear."

"Oh, I'm pretty strong on image," she said.

We settled on the slide up the hill and she relaxed. She had a strong face.

“Where you from?” I asked.

“L.A. - you?”

Forgive me, Edmonton, for the betrayal. I said Edinburgh, which was true.

“Cool place. I was there two years ago. At the festival.”

And we chatted – Edinburgh, L.A., travel, skiing, Canada. She had dazzling teeth beneath the goggles. Near the top I said I was going heli-skiing the next day. She thought that would be cool. I said, “Well, why don’t you come?”

Maybe she would, she said.

We came to the end of the run. With great-to-meet-you’s and see-ya’s, I took the bar, we peeled apart and she skied off.

A man swished to a stop as I was adjusting my gloves.

“What she say, man?”

“Who say what?”

He looked at me with pity. “D’you not know that was Jane Fonda?”

Jane was there with ex-husband Roger Vadim and a friend. Heli-skiing the next day? All I’m saying is Jane Fonda is a VERY COOL lady.

Jane has done her good bit for the COVID vaccination drive. On the Ellen DeGeneres show in February, she said: “It certainly doesn’t hurt; I encourage everybody to get it – two doses, as soon as possible. But I still wear masks, and I’m still doing social distancing. Things don’t go back to normal just because you have the vaccine; you can still spread it or pick it up. I’m feeling okay. I worked out yesterday. I had no reaction.” That’s as accurate and educated advice as it gets.

I met Dame Vera Lynn, a WWII icon, in 2002 in London at a party after the show “This is Your Life,” where I was the Mystery Guest for old friends Trevor and Ray Powles, whose lives were being exposed. Dame Vera was also a guest (she was Chair of the U.K. Breast Cancer Research Trust at the time). At the after-show party, we persuaded her to sing “White cliffs of Dover.” Her voice was slightly wobbly but no matter. I chatted with her after the song.

“It’s harder singing when you’re 83. And it’s much harder lasting out these late parties,” she said with a twinkle.

She said she now spent her time promoting her charities and wanted to know what I did in Canada – honestly, I almost expected Winston Churchill to butt in at any moment. Vera Lynn did so much for the forces and the citizenry’s morale during the dark days of World War II. She travelled indefatigably to Africa, Burma, Italy – all over – to entertain the troops.

Of course, she made a video for the difficult days of COVID last year, tirelessly promoting mask wearing and distancing: “We’re facing a very challenging time at the

moment, and I know many people are worried about the future. Keep smiling and keep singing. And get vaccinated when it comes.” Dame Vera died June 18, 2020, age 103, six weeks after her last public performance just after the height of the first COVID-19 wave in U.K.

Dolly Parton got her first dose of vaccine in February in Nashville. Having donated US \$1 million to Moderna towards research producing that vaccine, she waited till her age group qualified. "I'm getting my vaccine," she said. "I'm so excited. I've been waiting a while. I'm old enough to get it. And I'm smart enough to get it. So I'm happy I'm going to get my Moderna shot today. And I want to tell everybody – get out there and do it. And all you cowards out there: Don't be such a chicken squat. Get your shot."

Her hit song “Jolene” became “Vaccine.”

And there was Tom Jones, whom I met briefly years ago in a pub in Cardiff, Wales. I’m told that on being asked about his vaccination, he said his vaccinated arm had a minor ache for an hour or two. “It’s not unusual,” he said.

Others vaccinated celebrities include Willie Nelson, Elton John, Michelle Obama and other fine celebs too many to mention.

“The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter” (Attributed to Winston Churchill)

And the best argument against open access to clinical study data on vaccination is a five-minute conversation with a vaccine-avoider – extra-ordinary in view of the biggest success story for years – the most rapid production and full study of a new vaccine, ever.

Some 10-20% of people have serious trypanophobia (fear of needles) and the idea of injecting a vaccine under the skin even with a tiny size 21 needle is so foreign an idea to some that they freak. It’s likely that a quarter of the adult population have SARS-Cov-2 vaccine hesitancy or outright avoidance and will end up refusing vaccination, inevitably leading to continued smaller outbreaks.

This affliction is a mix of fears including mistrust of science: “these vaccines are dangerous and not proven to work”; limited education: “my chance of getting COVID is less than my chance of illness from the vaccine”; denial: “there’s nothing to this illness. It’s a sore throat”; paranoia: “If the government is behind it, I don’t trust them”; and for those with unique inside information: “It’s against God’s plan.”

A few do have difficulties making appointments because of work hours or inability to use the internet. Some have a good medical reason for avoiding vaccination. [Scientology is involved in some cases](#). In others, it’s the freedom to choose, forgetting they’re denying the freedom of others to be rid of the pandemic and to get on with their lives.

Meanwhile, the celebrity anti-vaxxers (usually younger or middle-aged actors) have been influencing younger “hesitants.” These include Jim Carrey, Robert De Niro, Cindy Crawford, Charlie Sheen, Jenny McCarthy, Jessica Biel and Robert Kennedy Jr. – some

of whom still harbor beliefs about the non-link between vaccines and childhood autism, a common condition where diagnostic criteria have shifted and evolved over the years.

At my school, there were several kids in my class who would be diagnosed as autistic now but who then were merely regarded as “odd” by the teachers and the rest of the class. The supposed relationship of increased autism diagnoses to vaccines might as easily be ascribed to time spent on the internet, computers, the rise of veganism, lack of exercise, CO2 levels, heavy metals, population density, traffic noise – in fact, anything else that’s rising – and heredity.

Then there are a bunch of D-level celebs I’ve never heard of. Some of these celebs might be called “dafties” though I’d hesitate to call them “numpties” and certainly not “bampots” (translation from Scots not required - nudge, nudge, wink, wink - say no more). But, along with Voltaire, I may disapprove of what they say, but defend (but, hey, not to the death) their right to say it, but not to print or post their views.

Alas, they are contributing to lengthening the pandemic and to the risk that worse variants may become prevalent with greater harm to the impoverished – precisely the group who benefit most from vaccination.

But for a D-level celeb, any publicity is good publicity.

Editor’s note: The views, perspectives and opinions in this article are solely the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of the AMA.

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