

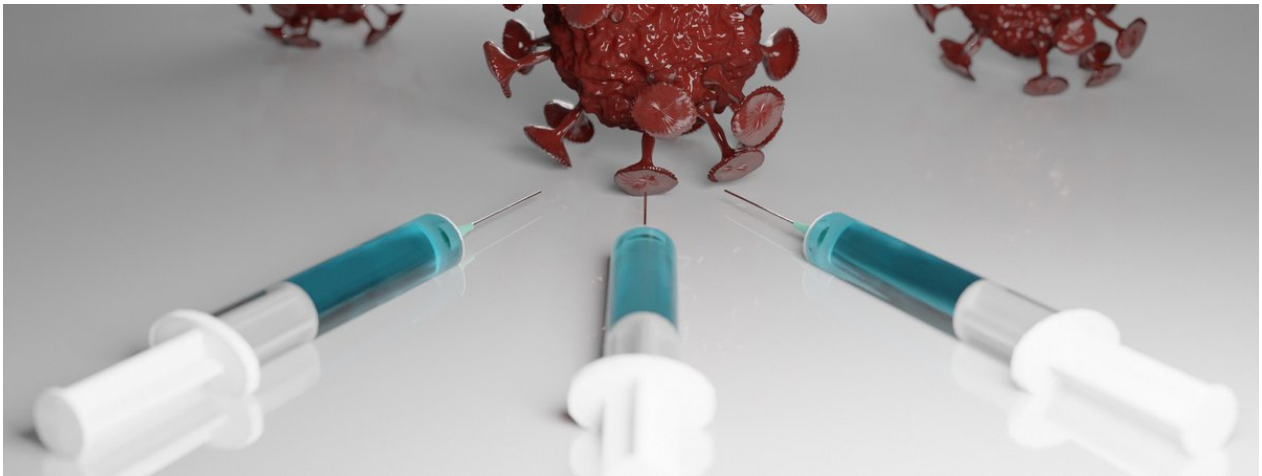
Alberta Doctors' Digest

We can see the enemy and he is us!

This pandemic of ours goes on and on, interminably. Our facilities are stuffed with burgeoning cases of COVID, with beds everywhere refitted for intensive care and more usual needs postponed. Nurses and allied folk are exhausted, with no respite in sight.

One might think we've faltered in our battle with the virus and that, unfortunately, is true enough, but as cartoon character Pogo might have said, "We can see the enemy and he is us!" Our predicament is senseless for we realize we're dealing not only with an epidemic of coronavirus, but also of misinformation.

Scientists have been wildly successful in producing a handful of vaccines that are generally safe and effective, and they've done this in record time. The problem that persists involves getting needles into arms. Up to a quarter of us object that our rights are being trampled on, that this has been too hurried an undertaking and that there may be problems down the road that we don't know about.



Vaccines have been developed in record time. The problem is getting them into arms. (Photo credit: Simon Torsten, Pixabay.com)

Still others contend there's jiggery-pokery going on, believing in diverse narratives that include stories of denizens from other worlds looking to work through vaccines and other treatments with malicious intent.

An otherwise impressive response to the pandemic has stumbled as vaccine foregoers have declined public health measures but have gone on to infect others or have fallen ill. This couldn't come at a worse time. The virus continues to mutate to more aggressive forms – as we knew it would – and public health experts warn of other viral intruders likely coming down the pike.

Our other problems haven't gone away either, as extreme weather events portend deepening misery with climate change.

Those of us with science backgrounds are dismayed at persons who refuse vaccination. Evidence is something we'd like to see. Deceit and error are not unknown in science, but our orientation is toward rationality and cause and effect.

Misinformation isn't new. Propaganda has been with us forever, along with conspiracy theories, witch hunts, and hoaxes large and small. History, as one author put it, teems with deceit. Our predilection for subterfuge and evil intent and activity seem to be part of the human condition. Perhaps we've evolved this way and can blame the slurry of reason and emotion that constitute us. We're unobservant, have poor memories, are subject to a welter of biases in our reasoning. Add emotion to this mix – fear, or love, or nostalgia, say – and we're a setup for misinformation.

Our intellectual heritage – the Enlightenment – with its emphasis on reason, skepticism and analysis, makes this surprising. We're resistant to repair as well. Those who have attempted to sway the vaccine resistant most often find them intransigent and unwilling to move beyond fixed positions.

Our world is notable for the anger we see everywhere, ranging from murderous shootings to religious intolerance and persecution, from racism and misogyny to exceptionalism and disdain for the plight of others. Again, it may seem that we've evolved this way, with those left behind unable to enjoy the promises of freedom, stability and prosperity, and increasingly susceptible to demagoguery. Those left behind react in similar fashion with intense hatred of perceived enemies and attempts to recreate an imagined utopia through self-empowerment and violence. Historically, the ranks of the disaffected have spawned wars in Russia, Germany and elsewhere – and we must not forget anarchist revolutionaries and terrorists of recent years.

Huge numbers of people have been left adrift in a demoralized world, and it is little wonder that there is incoherent thought and disregard for others, as people cling to misinformed narratives in attempts to understand complicated events.

Though it may be an atavistic notion to think of the world in terms of winners and losers, inequality doesn't work. It doesn't work in health care, it doesn't work politically for long, and it doesn't hold promise in respect to addressing climate change. All 7 or 8 or 9 billion of us are interdependent whether we like it or not.

Our computerized age has only added to our misery. It's fashionable to label our society as "digital" and to talk about looming challenges with artificial intelligence, but there are problems that are closer to hand, that lurk in our networked world, but which we may not recognize. Although our computers are wizards at finding stuff and figuring stuff out, person-to-person interactions – particularly social media interactions involving strangers – have a way of ending up as encounters that are hostile and demeaning.

We have developed social media based on computerized networks that are addictive in the usual sense of the word. The algorithms that run things present us with content that is endlessly entertaining but more sinister than we might think. Our algorithms learn from our preferences and reward us with responses that are ever better tailored to our imagined selves. Slipped into content along with this, can be anything – from endorsements of positions otherwise alien to us, to cryptic warnings of undisclosed chicanery, to tales of malfeasance, or to opportunities for fame and fortune.

It's important to realize that we don't pay for our social media experiences, not in usual ways, but someone does, and in a profiteering world, whether it's Google or Microsoft or

a third party, there is a cost. We can be awash in a sea of entertaining “dopamine hits,” oblivious to messages that are shaded, seemingly innocent, and difficult to parse, but the messages accrete and compound over time. It’s subtle, for sure, but our agency, our free will, can be leached from us over time, and we enter a post-truth world.

The best insights come from Silicon Valley itself, and I’d refer you to Jaron Lanier’s recent explication: “*Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (2018).”

This may be a strange place to arrive in our argument. To counter our reluctance to treat each other more honestly and more carefully, and to give appropriate regard to truth, well ... we’ve got to treat each other better. We’ve got to be more scrupulous.

I’m reminded again of T.S. Eliot (Little Gidding):

We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive
where we started/And know the place for the first time.

I hope we get there.

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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