

Alberta Doctors' Digest

The voice of sanity is growing hoarse

Although my column is directed at physicians, we're citizens first and must acknowledge that we're in trouble on many fronts. Our elephantine neighbour to the south has gone rogue with imperialist ambitions that threaten our sovereignty. On a federal level we're all but rudderless awaiting new leadership and a spring election. Provincially, we're trying to get by with a health system in disarray with mounting bills, waiting lists, and inadequate access to family practitioners and a variety of other practitioners.

We have new problems on the horizon. Avian influenza, or bird flu, is infecting not only birds, but growing numbers of cattle, and it may be just a matter of time before widespread crossover to humans spawns another pandemic.

Many have called for an inquiry into our muddling behaviour through the all-too-recent COVID-19 epidemic. Instead we've had a \$2M boondoggle: The Alberta COVID-19 Pandemic Data Review Task Force. Their report is fatally marred with inexpert, political bias that recommends the use of COVID vaccines be suspended pending further information – at the same time supporting alternative (and discarded) medical treatments including ivermectin and the anti-malarial hydroxychloroquine. The study has been regarded as anti-science and anti-evidence by experts, and is perhaps more realistically viewed as politically-disguised meat thrown to those members of the electorate who crow about their right to disregard reasonable public health measures.

Woe is me. Woe is us.

Though the report has been released, government hasn't acted on it so far. Perhaps the uniform dismay voiced by infectious disease and public health experts will be enough to keep it on ice, but the fact that the report happened is worrying enough.

Meanwhile, the premier has been busy with other things. Another AHS chief executive has been dismissed and yet another AHS board has been dissolved. The circumstances remain somewhat mysterious and seem to regard AHS's procurement processes with respect to chartered surgical facilities and possible governmental interference. The provincial auditor general is "looking into matters." The auditor general is, however, a governmental appointee, and one who must be aware of his own possibly precarious circumstances.

Stay tuned, but don't hold your breath.

Against this background let me provide further context.

Ours has been called the "age of anxiety," which seems appropriate. List all the problems we faced one year, or even 10 years ago (global warming, severe weather, forest fires, etc.) and we've not done much to solve any of them. In fact, we're worse off now with more strife, more lies, more misinformation or disinformation than ever before. As one newscaster put it, "the voice of sanity is growing hoarse."

What's gone wrong?

Let me quote Pinocchio:

"Where are the gold pieces now?" the Fairy asked.

"I lost them," answered Pinocchio, but he told a lie. For he had them in his pocket.

As he spoke, his nose became at least two inches longer.

– Carlos Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*

If only it were that simple! One of the fixtures of our lives has become our predilection to lie, cheat, swindle, commit fraud and so on. It's been around a long time and some believe that deception is built into our DNA, and has accompanied the growth of our prefrontal cortex many thousands of years ago, along with the expansion of our neural circuitry responsible for our socialization, ability to think about the future and so on.

Lying, defined as a false statement made with the intent to deceive, has accompanied the history of humankind, with persistent tales of deceit, treachery and fakery. It has troubled most everyone, from ancient religious scripture, through Augustine, medieval texts, Francis Bacon, and all the great philosophers, yet it persists in many forms – the fantasy of stories, and the myths we tell children, as well as the malign lies that work to gain advantage.

Lies have become background for much of our dealings with others.

A trivial example: my junk mail is replete with the usual get rich-schemes, but there's also a note from someone who says they've hacked my computer and wants cyber funds. Regular mail includes notices of a purchase I never made, and a new text message announces that an account, at a bank I've never used, is blocked until I call.

I don't know where this all ends. Perhaps we're all ready to become active participants ourselves in whatever fraudulent scheme presents itself, reined in only by our assessment of the risk of being found out. The issue becomes more troubling given our hyper-connected state. Perhaps we'll be gullible enough to sign on to one or other of the malign conspiracies that abound in digital spaces. Perhaps we'll give up on reason, give in to the dark and unsupported intimations that there's something wrong with vaccines in general. Perhaps we'll vote for the glibbest purveyor of snake oil who comes along.

Our brave new world is laden with deceit. To be aware is, to some extent, to be forewarned, but scepticism and an appetite for evidence is necessary lest we go down every garden path of willy-nilly trickery. Truth can be elusive.

The companion to our penchant for deceit is the battle for our attention. As a psychologist remarked a century or more ago, what we *attend to* becomes, in sum, the story of our lives, a truism that should be self-evident, but isn't. We've become prisoners of novelty and especially of digital gadgetry, no matter how transient or meaningless, and even how deleterious and harmful.

Only recently have we begun to separate cell phones and children, especially at school. We need to follow this thread further, into our adult lives. We don't need a zillion selfies. I'm distraught enough at how much time I can while away social media's effluent of brief

but pointless vignettes, stunts, dangerous undertakings, admixed with pictures of someone's barbecue. These are all bookended with advertisements that promise relief from life's miseries: potions derived from venomous snakes or tree frogs, extracts from plants along the Amazon, protocols that promise to banish plaques from my arteries, or offer golden years frolicking with puppies. These all trigger some ancient receptors in my hypothalamus – it doesn't matter which – but I am caught, tethered, until my need for something fried or sugary becomes overwhelming. Don't worry. I'll be back.

The latest thing, no longer new, but new to me, is artificial intelligence.

It promises to either assist and entertain us, invent new stuff for us, or, contrarily, it may take over our lives, blowing us all to smithereens.

I don't know which, but take your pick.

A friend showed me just one of its abilities. He poked around his phone a few times and presto, AI had written a sonnet. It wasn't Shakespeare, but it did cohere, in a fashion, though I couldn't make out the gist of what it had to say. But that might just be me.

The message here, all things considered, is what Neil Postman wrote some decades ago. The title of his book says it all: *We're Amusing Ourselves to Death (1985)*.

There is a remedy. As Warren Buffet has said about investing, it's simple but it isn't easy. It involves that quicksilver thing: willpower. Sounds simple enough, eh? I challenge the readers to, for example, give up their smartphones for a day or two, perhaps the weekend.

I bet you can't do it.

I'd say I could, but am afraid my nose would grow.

Like Pinocchio.

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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