

Bad Advice: Or Why Celebrities, Politicians, and Activists Aren't Your Best Source of Health Information

Paul Offit

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Every day, thousands of “leading experts” tell us what to embrace and what to avoid. But how useful is the advice? How do useless trends and products make their way into the public sphere while harmless ones become villains? *Bad Advice* by Dr. Paul Offit offers smart, well-researched, and eye-opening answers, showing how “expert” advice can become misleading and how ideas unsupported by evidence can become widespread beliefs.

To make its points, the book uses current topics, such as opposition to childhood vaccinations and the rise of the gluten-free diet. Although most issues are health related, issues like global warming are also noted, and the real-world examples make for a compelling read.

In addition to demonstrating weak links in the communication chain, the book also delivers a good deal of useful information. Without heavy-handed blame, chapters note the many factors that lead to bad advice, including human nature, financial motivation, personal and political agendas, celebrity clout, and practical concerns like the need to compress complex research into a few minutes of airtime.

The book also addresses how the viral nature of the internet can turn isolated health complaints into seeming epidemics. For example, three million Americans have been diagnosed with gluten intolerance, but 20 million Americans are firmly convinced they have the disorder.

Writing is clear and brisk throughout, lightened by a friendly tone and occasional wry humor. Examples are well researched and rely on reported facts rather than opinions or assertions. Though most of the book is third-person reportage, the author does step forward at times with first-person reflections on his experiences as an expert trying to get his point across as a television guest or when facing an adversarial journalist. Especially useful is a list of reliably objective science news blogs and podcasts.

Dr. Paul Offit's *Bad Advice* is a well-presented, knowledgeable, and surprisingly engaging look at the pitfalls of the information age.

SUSAN WAGGONER (July/August 2018)

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