

From the Kitchen

10 February 2010



It's good for you. It's bad for you. It will kill you. It's been proven safe. Don't combine X with Y or Z. Let's not jump to conclusions until all the data is in. It's best to be cautious.

It's a wonder any of us survives.

Almost every day there is something in the media that advises us that something we had thought was unhealthy is good for the heart or the brain or something else – in moderation. Then, the next day, an expert is quoted, telling us that pregnant women, the elderly and those with a genetic predisposition to cardiovascular disease should avoid it. The day after that, someone will tell us not to be overly concerned with what yesterday's expert said. Then we read or hear that something we've been happily eating or drinking for centuries is potentially dangerous. The next day ...

Often, a long bow is being drawn on both sides. Spurious connections or extrapolations are being made.

One example is the claim by a well-known company that its instant coffee is a great source of anti-oxidants. Actually, they don't say so directly; on a large poster under an image of coffee beans and a steaming cup, they say that "coffee offers benefits as a naturally rich source of antioxidants", below which is an image of jars of their instant coffee. The inference is clear. I once asked a representative of the company what happened to the antioxidants during the roasting and grinding of the beans and the chemical processes used to make instant coffee. He said he had no idea. On its web site the company claims the antioxidant chlorogenic acid is present in instant and brewed coffee [1], yet others say this is destroyed during roasting [2].

Governments can be guilty of false inference and extrapolation. In 1984, anything extracted or produced from comfrey was effectively outlawed for internal use by being placed on the schedule of poisons [3]. This was based on research done on alkaloids found in related plants such as Paterson's Curse, which had proven poisonous to mice if extracted, concentrated and injected. It was not exactly the same substance as found in comfrey, but media reports created public concern. Even if the substances were identical, for a human to be poisoned, s/he would have to ingest a large amount of the extract or eat kilos of raw comfrey. Most people couldn't stomach the required amounts and I can't imagine anyone shooting up comfrey in a back alley.

What is also worrying is when a drug is withdrawn from, say, the USA market because of dangerous side-effects being discovered and the Australian authorities tell us not to be alarmed, not to stop taking the drug, because the reports from the USA are still being assessed. Often the drug is not withdrawn in Australia until months or years later

Decades ago, while quite a number of people were asking whether there was any danger in frequent use of microwave ovens, governments, through their employees in health

departments, told us there was no basis for concern, that people should go on using these relatively new devices as there was no evidence of there being any danger. They were confusing lack of evidence of harm with evidence of lack of harm. They are certainly not the same.

A similar scenario has developed in relation to mobile phones.

There is a paternalistic attitude in governments and authorities talking to us like that. As the late Queensland Premier, Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, used to say: "Don't you worry about that." We are often treated as if we were children, being told we can't have or do this or that and not to worry about it, because we wouldn't understand.

It is also curious that, while it is expected that some people will have adverse reactions to any pharmaceutical drug, even that some will die as a result, non-pharmaceutical medicines (herbs, vitamins, minerals, etc.) are treated as potentially dangerous if one person develops a rash while taking 'alternative medicine' – it must have been caused by the 'unproven' medication. Hundreds of people a year die in Australia from the 'proper' use of one range of prescribed anti-inflammatory drugs alone [4], but that is unremarkable because it is expected.

People are routinely prescribed drugs 'in case it helps', without being told of the known side-effects. When the side-effects appear, they may be told that they don't really need the drug – it was 'just in case'. Thus, someone with a low cholesterol count may be given a cholesterol-lowering drug (by a specialist) 'in case your cholesterol goes up'. When the patient develops difficulty breathing and becomes vague and forgetful, the specialist takes them off the drug because they probably don't need it and, yes, those are common side-effects and were to be expected [5].

Governments, corporations and professionals seem to think it necessary to withhold information from the public, because they cynically believe that we wouldn't be able to handle it. With the amount of information available through the internet, much of the withheld information is available, but you need to spend the time to find it and know enough to sort the useful from the dross or the just-plain-false. It is one way of taking personal control. But we should not have to. We deserve to be better and more honestly informed

1. See: www.nestle.com.au/Products/Drinks/Nescafe/Default.htm
2. For example: "Normally, coffee beans are roasted at a temperature of around 240 to 250° Celsius ... Roasting leads to decomposition of chlorogenic acid." (Hiroshi Shimoda, www.skinnycoffee.com.au/blog/files/tag-tea.php)
3. For instance see: www.herbsarespecial.com.au/free-herb-information/comfrey.html
4. For instance see: www.virtualmedicalcentre.com/Treatments.asp?sid=78
5. This happened recently to someone I know well.