Editorial

Sophiology, vaccinology, and the healing professions – A warning from ancient Greece?

“We are drowning in a sea of data and thirsty for knowledge.”

To the ancient Greeks, whose thinking, philosophy, government, and art has influenced nearly every aspect of Western civilization; truth and the ability to think clearly and to articulate and share such knowledge (and therefore wisdom), were conceived of as god-like qualities. Evidence for this is the Greek development of a goddess of wisdom, whom they named Sophia; and the study and philosophy of wisdom, sophiology. Philosophy in turn has been defined as “the study of general and fundamental problems, such as those connected with existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language. It is distinguished from other ways of addressing such problems by its critical, generally systematic approach and its reliance on rational argument.” (my emphasis)[1].

This definition of philosophy, and its congruence with sophiology, are foundations vital to science, and for our purposes, the study of vaccines and public policy surrounding the use of vaccines – defined, to use the formal definition above – as “a critical, generally systematic approach and its reliance on rational argument”. To our detriment, and that of our patients and public, the ramparts of “knowledge, values, reason, mind and language” and wisdom that collectively guard Truth, have been threatened – alarmingly, from within, and less surprisingly, from outside the healing professions.

What do I mean? Gradually, since the late 1970s and early 1980s, it has become increasingly clear that there are many within the healing professions (and this derives from a more general manifestation of our aggregate cultural scientific illiteracy) who have abandoned the careful metrics and wisdom of the scientific method, for empiricism and an embracement of “individual voice and opinion.” This is, in essence a type of post-modern, post-intellectualism characterized by the loss of ‘transcendent scientific reference points useful for clear thinking and choosing wisely as a matter of habit’ (paraphrase borrowed from George Weigel [2]). Evidence for this claim comes in myriad forms whose current and past apparitions haunt us still – the Wakefield debacle, the French Health authorities (temporarily) suspending hepatitis B vaccination among adolescent females because of fear of inducing demyelinating disorders, the “Dr. Bob Sears” advocacy of unorthodox vaccination schedules, the poor state of knowledge among physicians and nurses in regards to vaccines (as evidenced recently by their fears and subsequent poor uptake of monovalent H1N1 vaccine in the midst of an influenza pandemic), health care providers who illogically accepted a variety of medical hoaxes including MMR and autism, mercury and autism, SIDS and vaccines, antigenic overload, multiple vaccines and induction of “autoimmune disorders” and many more. More alarmingly, it has now become apparent that parents are “shopping” for doctors and practices willing to acquiesce to non-evidenced based vaccination schedules, vaccine dosing, and unorthodox practices. Likely such practitioners do so in order to maintain a financially solid patient base – yet by any measure this is a gross violation of our professional obligation to “do no harm” (which in the 21st century may be defined as evidenced-based clinical care and use of the scientific method), and whose moral weight should trump finances and capitulation to unscientific demands from lay persons. The consequences soon become obvious – communities in the US where large percentages of children are un- or under-immunized, confusion among unsuspecting parents and patients, outbreaks of previously controlled vaccine-preventable diseases, morbidity, and always lurking close behind, deaths from vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles and pertussis.

Like ancient Greece where the coalescence of several events together doomed the brilliance of Athens and what it was; similar warnings are manifest in this cultural war against vaccine-preventable diseases. The Greeks sentenced Socrates to die – for the crime of “corrupting” the young men of Athens with his clear-headed thinking, reasoning, philosophy, and unflinching search and insistence on truth; in the face of many deaf to reason and willing to corrupt those ideals to satisfy other agendas. Willingly, Socrates drank from the hemlock-filled cup. Almost immediately after his death the demos-kratia regretted their vote for capital punishment, and in homage erected a statue in his honor at the Athens city gate for all to see and remember. For Athens the rise of “individual and group voice” over truth, wisdom and clear reasoning gained ascendence, and combined with decades of bitter civil wars among Greek city-states, led to the inevitable collapse and defeat of Ancient Greece and its ideals.

The parallels today seem ironic. Willingly, there are those within (and of course outside) medicine willing to abandon the advances science and medicine have made available to the public health in the form of the scientific method and evidence-based recommenda-tions for vaccines. Coupled with the ascendancy of the popular social media idea that “everyone's opinion on any topic is equally valid” – along with outright skepticism and even rejection of truth and wisdom (post-intellectualism), our cult of celebrity worship where the public are swayed by “celebrities” ignorant of the science they reject yet espousing fantastically ludicrous theories of their own, and finally the uncivil “wars” between medicine and public health authorities on the one hand, and anti-vaccinationists and unorthodox health practitioners [3] who have abandoned the scientific method on the other hand.
And like the ancient Greeks, we will discover, too late, that we have destroyed ourselves (or at least the tens of thousands of children and adults who die of vaccine-preventable diseases each year). Out of the emotion of fear, rather than reason, millions rejected pandemic H1N1 vaccine, and in the United States an estimated 2 million years of life were lost [4]. To those wed to wholesale rejection of the scientific method and to the value of vaccines, no level of evidence or data is “good enough”. This, as the ancients pointed out, is the continuing cycle of history, and as has been said, “to be ignorant is to be afraid” [5]. We have too many “ignorant and afraid” among us who, in the case of vaccines, make poor choices. Better that culturally we ponder the lessons of history that we might avoid the Santayanan fate of being doomed to repeat the same mistakes over and over as the consequence of our ignorance of history.

Sophiology, vaccinology, and professional ethics demand that we not abandon reason and the scientific method to the unorthodox, nor acquiesce to the demands of the scientifically illiterate, nor to those ignorant and afraid – rather we must insist as healing professionals that what we recommend and do for our patients be evidence-based and carefully teach our students and peers the necessity of scientific truth and wisdom in relation to vaccines. As Hippocrates himself put it “There are, indeed, two things, knowledge and opinion, of which the one makes its possessor really to know, the other to be ignorant. . . . Life is short, and the Art long; the occasion fleeting; experience fallacious, and judgment difficult. The physician must not only be prepared to do what is right himself, but also to make the patient, the attendants, and externals cooperate.” [6]

The courage to conduct ourselves as professionals in this post-intellectual era of vaccine skepticism and rejection, must come both from within the practitioner, and collectively from within the healing professions. This must, in turn, be grounded in sophia – knowledge, truth, and wisdom – and these in the ethos of our learning academies – in colleges, universities, medical, nursing, and pharmacy schools, and finally, in the agora – the public square – among the lay public from the earliest years of education onward. It is true and being played out on the global public health stage today across the world, with lives in the balance, that to be afraid is to be ignorant, and to be ignorant is to choose unwisely, and to choose unwisely is to invite disaster.

Despite the wonders of 21st century science and the millennia of scientific advances that have preceded it, at least when considered within the philosophical realm, people are not dying of vaccine-preventable diseases – rather, they are dying of ignorance. Ignorance kills, and as healing professionals we must be prepared to battle not only disease, but also ignorance, including among those from within our own ranks. The surprising lesson of 20th and 21st century vaccinology is that ignorance is considerably more difficult to control or eradicate than disease, and to date no vaccines have been developed which can inoculate us against ignorance. Rescue therapy is available though, in the forms of knowledge, truth, and wisdom – sophia.

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References


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