

Internet Drugs

Many of us will remember a time in school when there was a difference of opinion between the teacher and the textbook. It could have been a simple error (as in a misprint of the date of a battle) or a more serious blunder (as in the oft-repeated stupidity that Sugarloaf Mountain is an extinct volcano), but one way or another, it was always fun to point out to the teachers that she or he was mistaken, because the book said otherwise. It seldom seemed to cross our minds that in fact the teacher might have been right and the printed word wrong. It is this tendency to believe what we read that is at the root of this present article.

Humans seem to have a need to believe in something. Just a few decades ago this used to be the authority of the churches, schools and doctors, though the falling from grace of each of these is now all too evident. New beliefs have taken their place, perhaps new religious sects or healing rituals. Some find great solace in these while others are more sceptical. This article does not discuss which ideas are good and which are harmful, but merely raises awareness of the dangers of accepting any statement too gullibly. Why, for instance, do so many people disbelieve their doctors but are all too willing to accept a friend's simple (maybe simplistic) remedy? And in the absence of accepted standards and our general mistrust of experts, how do we decide for ourselves what is good, what is safe, what is true and what is appropriate?

This desire for trust and the tendency to unquestioningly believe the printed word are evident in the way we deal with the internet and the world wide web. One of the most fantastic and positive inventions of the past 50 years, the internet can be found in more and more homes every year, as well as in workplaces and internet cafés. But any good thing can also be used for bad and so we have to learn how to be careful with it. This is especially true if we are going to use the internet to replace trained professionals as the source of knowledge and wisdom in our lives.

Some 18 months ago Fergal Bowers, writing in this magazine about depression and the internet, warned us to be wary of internet sites selling tapes and books. He especially cautioned against sites which offer to sell prescription medicines. Clearly, the use of the internet has expanded considerably in the past few years, but generally there are limits on which sites you can access when connecting from an internet café or from work. For example, pornographic, satanic or terrorist sites may not be available, though there is usually no such restriction when you are in the privacy of your own home. Here, you can find out all sorts of information – and misinformation – about almost anything you wish, including sex and sexuality, religion, politics, physical health and, most important to this article, mental health. While privacy is helpful when you are researching something personal, it can also be a disadvantage when it comes to thinking about what you have just read. Without the facility to discuss with others the statements given (whether as facts or opinions), it is difficult to decide what might be a positive influence in your life. This is all the more dangerous if you happen to be vulnerable, say seriously depressed, at the time of reading.

As I said earlier, it is very easy to believe the printed word, simply because it looks authoritative. We know that textbooks can contain errors, but at least they have to be proof-read before being printed. Unfortunately, there is no such check on internet sites. When the

internet was invented as a tool for sending scientific information round the world very quickly, it was never envisaged that it would rapidly spread to other academic areas and then to virtually all aspects of our lives. Since the internet was never patented, there is no real control over the way it operates. This means that the web is open to anyone at all who wants to set up their own site, as long as they have the skill to write the pages, and that includes very many teenagers and a great many adults. Thus, there are sites on a huge range of topics, many of which are completely harmless, but there are also a great many unsavoury sites which many might consider unacceptable. Many of these sites are easy to spot, but the ones which have what we might call subversive writing are more difficult.

I want to stress here that, while I am fully in favour of the freedom for individuals to write their own web-sites, I do not support the idea that it is acceptable to write unsolicited emails advertising these sites. Many home-written sites are harmless, such as “Cyril, my pet rabbit” or “Top 10 haircuts of all time”. On the other hand, there are sites deliberately structured to prey on the vulnerable. Suppose there is a site called “How I can cure your depression”, written by someone who is described in the text as “the eminent doctor and author of numerous articles and books on self-help for the depressed”. Perhaps there are tantalising “true” stories of miraculous cures after just two weeks of using the author’s own therapy. Anyone reading this who happens to be down and feeling like there is little hope is likely to be tempted to try this “solution”. So far, there is little difference here from finding a similar book in a shop, except that there are far more checks on the publishing of books than there are on internet sites. Thus, an internet site can make wild unsubstantiated claims about cures, all of which can cause huge damage to those who desperately want to believe.

Another great benefit of the internet is the spin-off known as electronic mailing, or emails. This is a quick and simple method of communication with people around the globe and is very popular with a wide range of people. However, not all the emails you receive are benign messages from friends. Some, called “spam”, and the electronic equivalent of junk mail and you may be bombarded by 10 or 12 of these each day. They usually advertise some site and they pander to people’s needs. Many of these sell pornography, but there is a vast range of other products on offer as well. One recent and unwelcome addition to the spam emails is the offer of all sorts of medical assistance, including prescription drugs without a prescription.

Spam emails may appear to offer exactly the help you desperately want. For example, in the last few weeks I have received messages with headings such as “Need pills? Write your own prescription”, “Pain medication”, “Pain pills”, “No prescription needed”, “Overnight delivery”, “Tranquillisers”, “Sleeping pills”, “Prescriptions written and filled online”, “Any medication you want”, and many, many more. When I’m healthy and in good spirits, these are just a nuisance, but if I’m feeling down and despondent, who knows how I might react?

Essentially, spam is just advertising and, like all advertising, we need to be extremely careful what we believe and what we reject. All of us will have seen products (particularly health or “beauty” products) use pseudo-science to claim great benefits for their latest offering. Frequently, the scientific basis for the statements made is spurious at best. For example, one health drink may claim to contain Vibuforvin (a name I just made up) as if that made it better than its competitors, whereas in reality perhaps all health drinks contain Vibuforvin. So one competitor then trumpets their version of the drink as including Sustainitas C, and who are we to argue? The point is that the simple fact of someone making a claim in writing does not necessarily make it either true or important. How, then, do we best protect ourselves and others from the claims made in these unsolicited emails offering any drugs we like?

Most spam is best dealt with by deleting it unopened. If you don't recognise the name of the sender, just delete it. Any email which offers to sell you drugs and to have them delivered to you within 24 hours is clearly quite dangerous. If you need tablets, you should talk with a doctor. If you're already on medication and want to stop, again the best thing to do is discuss it with your doctor. While most of us learn the skills we need to deal with tempting emails, we can often weaken in the face of illness. This could be especially tragic if someone is seriously depressed. Without even leaving home all the ingredients of their own demise can be found. Just over a couple of years ago we had a major public awareness campaign about suicide, which kills more people here each year than motor accidents. Surely we cannot allow this good work to be undermined by allowing people to offer pain killers, tranquillisers and sleeping tablets over the internet without a doctor's prescription.

Finally, I want to stress again that I am fully in support of the internet and the web as hugely helpful tools for modern life, but when unknown people start contacting you trying to sell you drugs it must be time to say no. Exercise caution in your dealing with the internet and emails and all should be fine.

Robert Kerr