



PAGING DR. PALTROW

When it comes to our health, many of us trust celebrities over science. Have we become so gullible and star-struck that we're incapable of critical thought—or is our biology to blame?

BY SYDNEY LONEY

Steven Hoffman is an international lawyer specializing in global health and an assistant professor of clinical epidemiology and biostatistics at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont. He's also *totally* obsessed with celebrities. Hoffman, earnest and bespectacled, has spent the past two years studying how actors, professional athletes and pop stars influence our everyday health decisions. What he's discovered, he says, terrifies him.

"A lot of people who like celebrities are into pop culture—not so much for me. I see celebrities as serving a regulatory function, deciding what information we get about our health—and what information we don't get." Too often, Hoffman says, the health practices and products endorsed by celebrities are nothing more than "health-information pollution."

"You might think that celebrities who promote things that don't work aren't causing much harm, but they are," he says. "They make people aware of things that are unhelpful and wasteful and that can negatively affect their health. They also make it harder for people to figure out what they're actually supposed to do to be healthy."

Stars didn't always have this sort of medical clout. Fifty years ago, we didn't know what Audrey Hepburn ate for breakfast or whether John Wayne worked out. These days, with social media fuelling our insatiable appetite for all things celebrity, we know everything—and that knowledge alters not only how we perceive ourselves but how we live our lives. "The rise of the web has made a significant change in the production, distribution and consumption of celebrity images, especially in the last decade," says Samita Nandy, director of the Centre for Media and Celebrity Studies >

(CMCS), an international organization based in Toronto. “Celebrity worship has become completely pervasive in our society.” And nowhere are celebrities more influential than in the realms of health, beauty and aging.

Every month, at least a handful of people arrive at Dr. Yoni Freedhoff’s Ottawa weight-management clinic just to ask whether eating certain foods in combination—as Suzanne Somers has recommended for years—really helps with weight loss (it doesn’t) or whether they should follow the latest advice from Dr. Oz’s daily television show (the answer is almost always “Absolutely not”).

“There is no lack of evidence to suggest that celebrities influence people’s health decisions, because they do,” says Freedhoff, who is also a family physician and author of *The Diet Fix*. “But you can’t just tell people that what they’ve heard is stupid, or immediately discredit it as bunk, because many people want to believe these things.” One of the biggest problems, Freedhoff says, is that these days the medical advice offered by celebrities is more highly regarded than a doctor’s professional opinion.

Last year, *Divergent* star Shailene Woodley told Seth Meyers on his late-night talk show that she brushes her teeth with clay toothpaste, then swallows it to help her body detox. Zoë Kravitz was the next celebrity to publicly embrace clay as a detox

“Gwyneth was just a great person to use as a metaphor for the whole field,” Caulfield says. “There seems to be a growing tolerance of pseudo-science in our society, whether it’s around supplements, cleanses or crazy diets, and I think celebrity culture plays a big role in creating space for that to happen.” Still, Caulfield decided to personally test Gwyneth’s 21-day cleanse—more shakes than substance—just to see if it lived up to her hype. In all the months of gruelling research for his book, he says, completing the cleanse was by far the hardest thing he had to do. Caulfield lost nine pounds on Gwyneth’s diet, then promptly put the weight back on once it was over.

“One reason I think all of these diets and detoxes are so popular is that you get this positive feedback that you’re losing weight, so it looks like it works, and you feel different—I sure as hell did—so that must be the cleanse,” Caulfield says. “Then, when you put the weight back on, it’s not the cleanse’s fault, it’s your fault. It’s a best-case scenario for the people out there marketing these things.”

While cleansing and detoxing may be responsible for a lot of frustration, wasted money and unhealthy eating habits, perhaps the most insidious celebrity health claim to date is the thoroughly debunked assertion that vaccines cause autism. The seed of this idea was planted almost 17 years ago by disgraced doctor Andrew Wakefield and later given Hollywood



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miracle, and in January, Oprah added Juice Generation’s new line of beauty beverages (which contain charcoal and clay) to her O List of “A few things we think are just great!” Now you can order clay shots at juice bars across Canada and the United States. Freedhoff hadn’t heard of that one yet.

“I’m curious about what clay does, but it sounds super delicious,” he says, adding that there is simply no science to support the idea that people need to detox in the first place. We have internal organs that perform that function for us—and no amount of clay is going to make them more efficient at doing it.

In his new book, *Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong about Everything?*, Timothy Caulfield, a professor in the Faculty of Law and the School of Public Health at the University of Alberta, explores some of the health advice that Paltrow (who favours the new bone-broth craze over clay as her detox method of choice) serves up on her popular lifestyle blog, Goop. Caulfield says he picked on Paltrow simply because “she puts herself out there,” widely dispersing an array of dubious, often downright ridiculous health recommendations. (Among the latest: her endorsement of vaginal steaming, a process that she says cleanses the uterus and balances female hormones. Not surprisingly, health professionals have been quick to warn that the practice could lead to yeast infections.)

fanfare by Jenny McCarthy, an actor and former *Playboy* Playmate who believed her son developed autism after he’d been vaccinated for measles—a belief she shared at every televised opportunity. Although McCarthy can’t be held entirely responsible for the anti-vaxxer movement of the moment, not to mention the recent measles outbreaks across North America, she popularized a dangerous notion, one that other celebrities, including actor Mayim Bialik of *The Big Bang Theory* (who actually has a PhD in neuroscience), have helped perpetuate. A poll of more than 3,000 people in Ontario in February found 20 percent still believe that vaccines cause autism. Polls in Saskatchewan and Alberta have yielded similar results.

“Jenny McCarthy is a public health menace,” Hoffman says. The problem is that once a celebrity health claim is out there, it is so widely disseminated that it becomes difficult to dispel. Eventually the origin of the claim itself becomes murky. “Most people who are anti-vaccine are probably not saying it’s because they heard Jenny McCarthy talking about vaccines on television,” Hoffman says. “It’s more likely that they heard friends, family or acquaintances express some concern about vaccines that they heard from someone else who heard Jenny McCarthy say it. It’s a cascading effect.”

Hoffman says this has been one of the most troubling aspects of his research: the fact that misguided celebrity health advice can influence people indirectly, without them even knowing it. “Personally, I feel like a strong, independent agent who gets to make my own decisions,” he says, “but it really made me realize that I’m probably being influenced by what celebrities say too.”

In January, Hoffman released a study outlining 14 reasons why celebrities have so much influence over our health. “We found that people are biologically, psychologically and socially hard-wired to trust celebrity health advice,” he says. These people have become such a big part of our lives that we believe we know them, feel attached to them and see them as trendsetters in our society. “It’s like a form of pattern recognition—we are more likely to have a positive association with things that are familiar to us,” Hoffman says. It also leads to herd behaviour, as we seek to emulate celebrities by adopting their diets, exercise routines and medical procedures.

Studies show that unhealthy snack foods and drinks are frequently endorsed by popular athletes but that people are more likely to perceive them as being healthy—and ultimately purchase them—because of their association with their favourite sports stars. One 2013 study in the *Journal of Pediatrics* found children ate more chips when they were linked to a high-profile athlete. Hoffman also uses Angelina Jolie as an example. After Jolie announced that she’d tested positive for the BRCA1 gene mutation and had a preventive double mastectomy, there was “explosive interest in genetic testing,” even though the mutation itself is rare and testing is recommended only for women who have a family history of the disease.

Another standout in Hoffman’s research was what he describes as the celebrity halo effect. “Celebrities have a golden glow, and if they’re seen on a certain diet or taking a particular product, that glow is transferred to the diet or product, making it more appealing.” This is especially problematic when it comes to someone like Dr. Oz, an actual MD. Research published in the *British Medical Journal* in December revealed that no evidence could be found to support more than a third of the medical recommendations made on his show, which is worrisome given the reach Dr. Oz has, not just on television but on Twitter. (A single Dr. Oz tweet reaches almost four million followers.) “It’s just a constant, daily circus of nonsense from him,” Freedhoff says. “But if you’ve got a daily show that has to draw millions of viewers, you need hype and miracles, or your show won’t be on the air for long.”

One of those miracles is the green-coffee-bean extract Dr. Oz fervently endorsed in 2012, which resurfaced to embarrass him last year when he was grilled about it before a U.S. Senate subcommittee hearing that probed weight-loss scams (but not before he’d helped sell more than half a million bottles of the bogus weight-loss pills). Unfortunately, celebrities seldom endorse the strategies that really work, the things Freedhoff refers to as the non-sexy stuff: cooking more frequently, sleeping, not smoking, having friends, drinking in moderation. “That’s 95 percent of everything we know to be true about healthy living,” he says.

Freedhoff blames celebrities for perpetuating the belief that magic exists, but Samita Nandy of the CMCS tends to



side with the stars. “I don’t think celebrities have a greater obligation than anyone else when it comes to following health tactics,” she says. “Fans idolize celebrities and overlook their own responsibilities and influences in the process, but we’re all ultimately responsible for our own well-being.”

Hoffman, meanwhile, places the blame elsewhere: on the public health authorities who seem unable to adequately debunk false claims and convince people of the medical benefits of scientifically proven health interventions over celebrity pseudo-science. “Public health organizations and charity groups would benefit from engaging celebrities to promote evidence-based practices,” he says. He praises stars like Glenn Close and her efforts to educate people about mental illness, Michael J. Fox and the \$450 million he’s raised for Parkinson’s research and Jamie Oliver, who has partnered with various medical establishments to promote healthy eating.

Finally, Hoffman says we need to brush up on our own science literacy. Just being critical of celebrities who claim “the research shows” or “studies say” will go a long way toward helping us take our health back into our own hands, Hoffman says. “Science is still the best tool we have to inform the way we can live better lives. It’s about finding the good science and sifting out the bad, which so often has the glow of a celebrity wrapped around it.” ©