6.6: Case Study- Del Bigtree

Del Bigtree is a prominent anti-vaccine activist and an illuminating example of how the movement uses misinformation to spread fear and create mistrust of health professionals. Bigtree rose to prominence as a colleague of Andrew Wakefield’s who helped him develop a film about vaccines. He is a regular speaker at anti-vaccine rallies in the United States and, at times, in Canada. His Facebook page has more than 140,000 likes and his weekly podcast draws thousands of listeners.

Bigtree describes himself as a medical journalist, which lends him a “sense of authority” to discuss issues around vaccines. He speaks forcefully and uses shocking stories to persuade his audience. For instance, at a recent rally, he pinned a yellow star to his clothing and compared the victimization of anti-vaccine activists to the victims of the Holocaust.

Like many others, Bigtree does not simply say “vaccines are bad.” He frames his messages as though he is a protector of public health who must inform individuals about dangers that governments and pharmaceutical companies are conspiring to cover up. He is the head of an organization, called the Informed Consent Action Network, whose stated mandate includes “fighting for parents’ rights,” “protecting children,” and “science-based inquiry.”

These sound like laudable goals. However, the messages he delivers are rife with misinformation, fabrications, and outright lies. For instance, Bigtree claims that no placebo-controlled trials of vaccines have ever been conducted, which he says is proof vaccines are not safe. However, this is false. The reason vaccines are not typically tested against a placebo is that it is unethical to knowingly expose a control group to the risks of a vaccine-preventable illness. No such trial would be ethically approved. This is just one example of an artificial, manufactured controversy employed by anti-vaccination advocates to manipulate, influence, and persuade. Anti-vaccine activists are dedicated to growing audiences on social media and figuring out how to maximize the total number of clicks, likes, and shares. Rising rates of measles outbreaks in unvaccinated populations of developing countries shows that these messages are having an
Impact.

Image 6.2 provides an example of a mock anti-vaccine website. Notable about this image is the subtle messaging like ‘vaccine awareness’ and ‘informed consent.’ which are intentionally cryptic to allure readership while disguising the ultimate anti-vaccine agenda.

Image 6.2: Mock page of an anti-vaccine website

Points of Consideration

Bigtree’s tactics to confuse the public and garner mistrust in science through inaccurate claims about placebo drugs are not novel. Indeed, tobacco companies in the 1960s popularized similar falsehoods by obscuring the link between smoking and lung cancer.

An interactive or media element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/immunizations/?p=194