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Beware of politicians playing doctor

Chris Selley, National Post · Wednesday, Jan. 5, 2011

Mainstream medical opinion is roundly skeptical of Paolo Zamboni's "liberation" treatment for multiple sclerosis, but that's not to say the Italian surgeon won't one day be vindicated. As many have pointed out, nobody believed the *Helicobacter pylori* bacteria caused stomach ulcers either -- but it does. It's possible cerebrospinal venous insufficiency (CCSVI)-- the name Dr. Zamboni gave to ostensibly constricted neck veins, which he relieves with angioplasty, often to rave reviews -- will eventually be acknowledged as a key piece of the MS puzzle.

If so, Canadian politicians will be able to take some credit. Alberta, Newfoundland and the federal government have all agreed to spend money studying the treatment, and Saskatchewan plans full clinical trials. If they were honest, though, some of those politicians would admit they weren't entirely motivated by an unquenchable thirst for medical truth.

Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff, who promises to fund clinical trials as prime minister, would be one. "Why can't Canadians get a shot at getting at something that might have a therapeutic benefit?" the erstwhile professor asked last month, seemingly opening the door to everything from leech therapy to trepanation. Based on their op-ed in Tuesday's *Ottawa Citizen*, Liberal health critic Ujjal Dosanjh and MP Kirsty Duncan would be two more. I claim no significant expertise on MS or CCSVI, but I know bad arguments when I see them.

Here's one: Mr. Dosanjh and Ms. Duncan claim that the "scientific expert working group" on CCSVI, assembled by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, includes "no experts, no experience, and many undeclared conflicts of interest."

Pardon? That's 23 individuals they're impugning there. They include respected neurologists from the Ottawa Hospital, the Cleveland Clinic, St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto, NYU and the Universities of Calgary, Wisconsin, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Texas. So, what are these conflicts of interest? CCSVI activists such as Ashton Embry, a Calgary geologist, insinuate some working group members are in the pocket of pharmaceutical companies, which profit from current approaches to MS treatment. But that would be pretty strong stuff for politicians to hurl at respected physicians -- so they don't. They just drop the stink bomb and flee the scene.

Moving on, Mr. Dosanjh and Ms. Duncan claim not to understand why the government is dragging its heels on clinical trials when "87% to 90% of MS patients show one or more venous abnormalities in MRIs and ultrasounds, and 97% when angioplasty is done." You'll find such numbers on websites trying to sell liberation therapy tourism, but if you consult more disinterested sources you'll see that findings differ markedly. A randomized University at Buffalo study released in February, for example, found that only 56.4% of MS sufferers had CCSVI (and 22.4% of non-MS sufferers had it too).

The Liberals like to portray themselves as the party of science and reason and the Conservatives as the party of mulish right-wing stupidity. On the mandatory long-form census, on crime prevention, on climate change, on the importance of abortion for maternal health in the developing world, they are comfortably in and of the mainstream.

"The government is slaughtering good medical practice on the altar of ideology," MP Dr. Keith Martin complained when the Tories insisted family planning had nothing to do with maternal health -- and he was right. On the MS file, however, the Liberals are way out in left field. And we all know why: Because there's nothing in it, politically, for them not to be.

It took some flaming cheek for Mr. Dosanjh and Ms. Duncan to claim that "disregarding experts is a dangerous precedent" in an op-ed that involved disregarding -- not to mention disrespecting -- literally dozens of medical practitioners and researchers. But precious few politicians are capable of resisting the lure of emotionally charged issues, and the opportunities they afford to care out loud. From this appalling cynicism, there seems very little hope of liberation.

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