Medical Xpress

Irrelevant information in medical testimonials may lead to poor consumer choices

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Medical testimonials on the Internet and elsewhere present powerful personal stories and useful information, but they can also be dangerous to your health if distracting, irrelevant information leads to inappropriate treatment decisions, say researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"Distracted by Details: Narrative Influence Following Conflicting Stories" was published in July in the journal *Media Psychology*. Authors were Joseph P. Simons, a 2013 Ph.D. graduate in social psychology, and Melanie C. Green, assistant professor of psychology, in UNC's College of Arts and Sciences.

"We grow up learning from stories and we often identify with the people or characters telling those stories," Green said. "So we are not used to stepping back and analyzing the information, especially in the context of complex medical conditions and treatment options." Green is a social psychologist whose research has focused on the power of narrative to change beliefs.

Green noted that consumers tend to give more credibility to testimonials coming from people with whom they have something in common, even though some kinds of similarities may be irrelevant for the decision at hand. For example, if someone loves classical music and reads an online or magazine testimonial about a cleaning product written by another

classical-music lover, he or she is more likely to believe it is a good product, even if the classical-music connection has nothing to do with it.

Green and Simons hypothesized that this phenomenon would apply to medical treatment recommendations for a fictional "patient."

To test their hypothesis, researchers presented 111 subjects with general information about a fictional illness and two different drug treatments, including clear indicators for which treatment would be most medically appropriate. They then provided the subjects with two conflicting treatment testimonials and asked them to recommend the most appropriate treatment option for a "patient" with the same illness.

The testimonials included information directly relevant to the illness and appropriate treatment options, the study noted, while other information was irrelevant to the medical situation. The irrelevant information reflected shared interests between the people giving the testimonials and the "patient" for whom the subjects were making a treatment recommendation, such as a love of classical music or baseball.

"As predicted, distracting similarities led to less [medically] appropriate treatment recommendations," the researchers wrote. They noted that the study didn't allow for determining the role of personal relationships with the "patient."

"Personal stories can often provide valuable perspectives on medical conditions, as long as consumers recognize that irrelevant factors can distract them, resulting in decisions based on a 'gut feel' for the storyteller's credibility, rather than whether the data are accurate and applicable to a specific situation," Green added.

More information: www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10 … 15213269.2013.784694