

[“Regulatory bodies should not be hiding behind CAM policies”](#) Interview with Dr. Philippe Chouinard

October 20, 2019

Transcribed by Julie Ann Lee

(Theme song – soft piano music)

**ABK:** Dr. Philippe Chouinard is a Family Physician based out of Moncton New Brunswick. He’s been involved in a developmental paediatric practice with a specialization in ADHD & autistic populations since 2010. His work has led him to take a strong stance against pseudoscience marketing to physicians and he also has an interest in countering health misinformation on Social Media. Dr. Philippe Chouinard!

**PC:** Hi!

**ABK:** Hi. Let’s start with some news. [Recently], Canadian **Stanley Nowack** was convicted under Canada’s Food and Drug Act for marketing, packaging and selling **MMS**. MMS is Miracle Mineral Solution which is a bleach product. It’s a phony autism cure and the marketing says it will ‘detox’ the child’s body of some imagined parasites that the MMS sellers claim cause autism. Now we know that there’s no veracity to the claim and also that it causes injury and great harm to the children.

So, Health Canada has been taking actions trying to get these products off the internet and has sought various injunctions against various website sellers, but now we have the first prosecution being Mr. Nowack for selling MMS. This is the first time that a judge has sentenced anyone and the judge sentenced him to a 2 year conditional sentence, and a 2 year probation order. So, that’s the news of the week. What do you think of this sentencing in this case?

**PC:** I’m in complete agreement with the decision here, individuals like Mr. Nowack are preying on families basically desperate for cures, selling products that are not approved by Health Canada and putting children’s lives at risk. As you said earlier, there’s no evidence that parasites or toxins are a root cause of autism, and no evidence that using of bleaching solutions such as MMS would effectively cure it. Ah, side effects aren’t benign. They include nausea, diarrhea that can lead to potential dehydration, kidney failure and death.

So, I personally hope it’s going to send a clear message to others who may be selling similar products as they’ve unfortunately become harder to locate since Health Canada has put a ban on MMS. I’d also like to say that Canadians in particular, we have a mechanism in place to report these individuals directly to Health Canada so if you go online there’s what you call a Health Product Complaint Form. You can fill it out and basically if somebody is making unfounded health claims with a product that’s unapproved, basically you can go right ahead and do that. Very easy process to do. Ah, and if anybody does know of someone selling these products or any health indication, be it a child or an adult, I’d strongly urge them to report it.

**ABK:** I know that Health Canada takes health claims very seriously, particularly false claims and particularly if they’re causing harm --and they want to hear from people, but it seems like we also need a multifaceted approach to the whole issue of stopping autism pseudoscience... because we can stop the

marketing and selling of MMS through regulation which is extremely important, but there's also the possibility and the reality that these treatments can still go underground.

We see this with MMS going on to the dark web for example. People can still access it because it's a chemical compound and it can always be made. So, it seems like we need to also look at the mindset that's causing parents to make a demand for these kind of products, to really stop it. I also see a lot of parents of newly diagnosed children kind of in a panic. And I don't think anyone makes good decisions when they're in a panic.

So I'm wondering when that diagnosis happens, what can the physician do to kind of tamp down some of that panic and reassure or provide information that's useful to parents to keep them from going down that road into those kind of communities?

**PC:** I think the first thing is that physicians probably don't realize how big a role they can play to help these parents and a lot of the times they aren't fully prepared to do so. Quite honestly, when I did my medical education 10 years ago, we didn't really get much guidance when it came to autism. So, I had to learn a lot on my own after becoming a Family Physician. Being involved in the medical education here in New Brunswick, I see it getting better but we still have a ways to go.

I think what's important is that we need to look further than the diagnostic criteria. We need to teach our future physicians about what comes next, and we need to offer them opportunities to develop skills during their practice as well. The other part is that we need to be acutely aware that an autism diagnosis can come with a wide range of emotions for parents, and we need to be ready to support parents in dealing with these emotions. We need to guide them towards evidence based information about autism and help them search for support, respite and transitional care. I personally recommend **NeuroTribes by Steve Silberman** and **The Thinking Person's Guide to Autism** book as good launching points for parents receiving a new autism diagnosis.

**ABK:** That's great. Providing the appropriate resources is so important and it's challenging for physicians I can imagine because you have a certain amount of time that you can spend with a family so I like that idea that you have of having kind of a pre-made list of books and resources- online resources that you can share with parents that they can take out of the appointment and build community that way.

I think with **Complementary and Alternative Medicine**, one of the huge advantages that that practice has over the medical practice in Canada is that an appointment with a naturopath is an hour, and it's an easy hour. People are paying with it for cash out of their pocket, and a physician doesn't always have that same leeway and amount of time for communication. So, any kind of other ways of getting information to parents seems to be really key.

I'm kind of gonna switch gears and talk a little bit about how pseudoscience has started to penetrate mainstream medicine because there is a sense of almost buy-in from mainstream medicine ...or an uneasy acceptance, or sometimes a curiosity and research obviously, but it can cross lines really quickly especially when you start getting advertisers involved at medical conferences for various Complementary Alternative Medicine products that are unproven.

You recently petitioned the College of Family Physicians in Canada- their annual conference where they were promoting certain unproven complementary medicine products, I think it was even Homeopathy had a big booth there, is that right?

**PC:** Mm-hmm. That's correct.

**ABK:** All right. How did that happen? How did we get to this point where the lines are so blurred right now?

**PC:** I think the lines get blurred because there's a general misunderstanding of the true harms of pseudoscience and the harms of allowing the integration of pseudoscience with mainstream medicine. It also occurs because of a significant lobby from alternative medicine providers to have their practices legitimized in the eyes of health care and of the public.

In the case of the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the previous policy was that they would permit these pseudoscience vendors as long as their products were not directly harmful. Until recently, they weren't considering indirect harms as in the harm of taking this product as opposed to the proper treatment of the condition. Also, they were considering it as education for physicians because they would know about what their patients are using. First, we shouldn't be automatically permissive of treatments on the merits that they're popular with patients. Second, we aren't truly being informed about these products if the only opinion we receive is from the person marketing or selling it to us.

**ABK:** And, so how was your petition received. ...What did doctors think of your position about stating that a homeopathy booth and others should probably not be at the College of Family Physicians in Canada conference?

**PC:** I was pleasantly surprised how much support it received. And not only doctors, I mean there's doctors, scientists, concerned citizens across Canada and beyond from as far as the US, UK, Malaysia, Australia. Everybody supported the efforts to rid the conference of pseudoscience.

**ABK:** What about the conference organizers themselves, when you presented the petition to them?

**PC:** The petition was also well received by the members of the College of Family Physicians of Canada board. They're open to hearing the concerns and they understood that allowing pseudoscience vendors was akin to legitimization to a certain extent and the vendors could then construe their involvement however they please. Which to me was a big concern.

We will be having discussions in the near future on how we can better implement change to allow for a proper vetting process going forward which would include scientific plausibility and proof of effectiveness for alternative medicine providers.

**ABK:** Wow! That's a big victory. Sounds like it's going to be very different next year. Things are going to look different there.

**PC:** I would hope so.

**ABK:** When a parent comes in to your office who's pursuing autism pseudoscience, what do you say or what can you say to be helpful?

**PC:** Yeah. It's a hard question and it's a frustrating situation for any health professional to be put in. At the end of the day our role is always to support the patient regardless of the beliefs of the parent. So I believe that always has to be the focus. The best tools we can use to accomplish that are being properly educated about autism. Being aware of the stresses that the diagnosis can put on the family and, I think first and foremost is always be willing to listen to the concerns. We're not going to win all the battles with education, collaboration, support and empathy [but] we can hope to guide these families to consider options other than pseudoscience to care for their autistic children.

**ABK:** Do you feel like the options are getting better, or what kind of hope is there for people who have gone down this rabbit hole in getting them out of it, and then where do they go after that?

**PC:** I think it's getting better. I think the key is finding something to hold onto. Something that you can consider being a small goal and then building on that. And at the end of the day, I don't think that it's confronting that's gonna be the solution. It's finding a common goal and building that trust. If you can build that trust then you can hopefully progress towards goals that are evidence based and not necessarily pseudoscience based.

I think a lot of it has to do with trust and it's difficult when we're working in a Physicians' Office as you previously mentioned, we don't always have time. We don't have all the time we would want, but it's really to try to focus on, again, helping the child, what can be done – even if it's simple. If you can focus on that and then build that trust, you have a better chance than none to accomplish something with that family.

**ABK:** Well, Philippe Chouinard, thank you very much for coming to speak. You're a wonderful doctor and you also do so much for the health of our community. Thank you very much.

**PC:** Thank you Anne.

[12:19]

#### **ABK: Afterword**

*My interview with Philippe is shorter than most because we talked about some of the details of a legal case and I had to cut that out. So, I'm ending by sharing some thoughts based my discussions with Philippe and some others in this community about consent, proxy consent and the law.*

In liberal circles we hear a lot about teaching kids about consent. Our Sex Ed curricula, our parent resources, our school policies: so many of them focus on this concept – a crucial one--that children need to know their boundaries and how to say *no*. But when it comes to autistic and other disabled kids, does our society place the same value on consent? And do our laws protect disabled children's rights to personal boundaries, physical safety, health and their right to say no?

Or is there a double standard in whether or in how much we value the right to consent? Do we excuse some types of mistreatment of autistic children that we would condemn if done to a neurotypical child-- and if so, why?

I get interviewed about autism pseudoscience and one time when the mic was off, someone on the news team said to me, 'But of course we can't blame the parents, I mean they're desperate.' And I found that so interesting because for one, some parents who commit medical abuse ...are indeed held liable in the criminal justice system. In Canada this past year, 2 sets of parents have been prosecuted for denying their children the necessities of life through medical neglect as well. Both sets of parents embraced pseudoscience, and despite the arguments of the defense, prosecutors made a fair case and the judges decided [that] yes, there are consequences regardless of motivation and emotions for negligence, neglect and abuse of children. These parents [served] jail time.

Desperate parents beat their children too. Some have a religious belief system that tells them this is what their child needs, or that they're doing God's work. Yet, only in the case of disabled children do we see the desperation defence for violence so often win the day. In the case of filicide, if the child is disabled juries are more likely to be sympathetic with the parents. And risk often doesn't seem to mean the same thing when something is being done to an autistic child.

**Abu Bakar Tariq Nadama** died from chelation for autism. Our provincial self-regulating College knows this. I know because I'm the one who told them, yet to this day they haven't taken action to stop the doctor in our province who's doing chelation for autism on kids. When I talk about that story, some people will still say to me, 'But the parents are desperate.' People will say, 'I can't judge' because they themselves have never walked in the desperate mothers' shoes.

And I want to ask them – *Do you know whose shoes you have also never walked in? Those of the desperate child.* A child desperate to be loved without condition. Desperate to be able to be authentic and accepted. Desperate to feel safe. Desperate to spend their Saturday afternoon playing, not in a strip-mall basement receiving chelation autism therapy or hyperbaric oxygen treatment. Desperate that a family vacation doesn't turn into a nightmare when Mom and Dad fly them down to Panama for "Autism Stem Cell" treatment. Desperate to feel safe and healthy again. Desperate to escape the bleach, the Nemechek protocol, the B12 shots, the saliva tests, the diet restrictions, the antibiotics for fake Lyme-disease-autism. Desperate to escape the pain of hearing their own mothers say they are grieving them, even as they are alive, because autistic children are too often seen to some as a broken version of normal.

When we think about autism pseudoscience, whose shoes are we stepping into? Is it the desperate parent or is it the child? And how does that impact our views including our policy and our ethos of consent, boundaries, bodily autonomy? Where is dignity and autonomy enshrined in the law for autistic or otherwise disabled children?

Our province's proxy consent laws by and large allow parents to proxy consent for many procedures allowed by law for a consenting adult. But when the procedure is not being done on a consenting adult, but rather on a frightened child, should a proxy consent be considered 'consent'? Can it be considered so for a young adult, a person under guardianship, or an adult who cannot give informed consent?

Where there is no evidence of benefit and clear evidence of harm, should proxy consent for a child

prevail? Is there anyone who thinks that these children want this?

I've talked to adult survivors of childhood autism pseudoscience, and they were desperate to escape it. Our system of child protection is set up to protect children from abuse, to give them an escape route regardless of the parent's motives. It's why we have laws against hitting our kids, or refusing them the necessities of life...yet when it comes to disabled kids and pseudoscience, there are very few protections. Our social safety net is failing them.

To understand why this system is failing and why pseudoscience prevails, we need to look at some of the broader cultural ideas about autism therapy itself. The assumption mainly that the best end result is always a **compliant** child.

The danger in fixating on compliance as the end goal is you set a standard that's portable to any form of coercion, including pseudoscience. Because autism pseudoscience at its core scares autistic kids into compliance as much as it tricks the neural firings of their misguided parents. Under the broader cultural bias we can easily forget who has been hurt. This is why until just last year, Autism Speaks recommended pseudoscience on its website and Autism Canada still does. Any means to justify the ends when the only end you seek is a compliant child. The end goal of compliance at any cost dehumanizes disabled kids.

We will never solve the problem of pseudoscience or antivax unless we can take a clear look at the role that stigma has played in many approaches to autism therapy. If we don't centre autistic children when we talk about it, and we keep pretending that we as grown-ups should have unmitigated agency for them, even in the face of risk, even when it clearly compromises the happiness and the dignity of the child, even when we wouldn't ever do the same to a neurotypical child – then we're perpetuating every protocol we claim to be against. We're saying it's okay to compromise the bodily autonomy of a child for the emotional needs of the parent.

We need robust consent laws to protect autistic kids and all disabled kids from pseudoscience. Proxy consent for autism pseudoscience is never okay. Regulators have been going after some of the sellers, and that's a good start, but to really have an impact, we have to talk about consent.

(Theme song – soft piano music)

**ABK:** Today's interview was with Dr. Philippe Chouinard, a Family Physician who specializes in ADHD and autistic populations. He spoke to me from his office in Moncton.

You've been listening to Noncompliant. I'm your host Anne Borden King. Noncompliant was recorded at DB Audio and MCS Recording Studios. Various episodes were engineered by Dave Boire, Nathan Gravette and TJ Liebgott. Thanks to our engineers and thanks for listening.