

Friday Feedback: MD Celebrities in the Land of Oz

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This week we saw [celebrity doctor Mehmet Oz, MD](#), raked over the coals by a Senate subcommittee – and, more specifically, by Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.) – about the way Oz popularized questionable, and in some cases dangerous, weight-loss supplements. Of course, Oz is not alone in his role in the media as a physician who has gained a national audience.

We reached out to a diverse group of healthcare providers via email and asked:

What is the responsibility of physician celebrities in light of their Hippocratic oath – and what is their role (if any) in the nation's public health goals?

The participants this week:

Cherie C. Binns, RN, an independent multiple sclerosis-certified nurse based in Wakefield, R.I.

Kevin R. Campbell, MD, cardiologist, UNC Health Care in Chapel Hill, N.C., who also makes weekly national appearances on Fox News, CBS, and NBC

Russell Libby, MD, founder and president of Virginia Pediatric Group, a primary care pediatric practice with three offices in northern Virginia, and president of the independent practice association HeathConnect IPA

Chris Lillis, MD, a primary care physician from Fredericksburg, Va., and board member of Doctors for America

Tanzid Shams, MD, sports concussion specialist and pediatric neurologist in Boston



Wizard of Oz?

Russell Libby, MD: "I take some measure of satisfaction seeing Oz called to the mat by a credible, albeit judgmental group. I have been appalled by his manipulation of the viewing public for his financial gains and ego inflation. He has advocated bogus treatments, questioned public health measures such as immunizations, and used faux science to influence consumers."

"It is unfortunate that this clearly bright and talented individual would use his professional privilege to mislead and misinform for his own gain. Dr. Oz has lost his credibility with the profession that he has used to achieve his commercial success."

Physician Celebrity Ethics

Kevin Campbell, MD: "As physicians we have a responsibility to accurately represent ourselves and any therapy or treatment to our patients. As a physician who also works in the media world, I feel an even greater responsibility to make sure that everything that I say is well supported by good clinical trial data."

"I believe that it is my responsibility to ensure that my viewers (and patients) have a clear understanding of therapies that are both proven with solid scientific research and those that are supported only by anecdotal evidence. While supplements and alternative therapies may be important to some patients and physicians, I believe it is the physician's responsibility to make sure that patients understand that there are no miracle drugs or wonder pills."

Chris Lillis, MD: "'Celebrity' physicians have the same ethical standard as any practicing doc. Dr. Oz and other physicians with highly visible media profiles most certainly do not have a different ethical standard than I do, but their recommendations have an infinitely greater potential for harm due to the size of their audience."

Tanzid Shams, MD: "In general, I am supportive of physician 'advocates.' But it is unethical to promote weight-loss supplement for financial gains."

Cherie C. Binns RN: "Medical celebrities, because of their visibility and instant recognition, should to be held to a higher ethical standard than their counterparts who live lives less in the limelight. It is a commonly held belief that if one is in the public eye, one researches well and intimately knows about what they speak."

"'First ... do no harm' has to be the modus operandi of all of us who are trained medical professionals whether we teach, treat, or advise. This has to hold true if our sphere of influence extends beyond our own patients, and it is an absolute necessity that we not compromise our professionalism by touting commercial interests."

Libby: "The public and the profession need credible, altruistic, and informed representatives to help advocate for healthy lifestyles, appropriate care, and nuanced progress in healthcare delivery. There are important issues that need to be addressed in healthcare and need responsible spokespersons who are respected and credible; that is not what this scrubs celebrity is all about."

Media Platform

Lillis: "Our fiduciary responsibility is to put the interest of our patient ahead of our own, and above all do no harm. In the year 2014, the only way to live up to this is through evidence-based medicine. Unproven treatments, supplements, or procedures should not be promoted by a 'cheerleader;' they should be examined through the scientific method prior to any clinical application."

Campbell: "Oftentimes, medical professionals who appear on television are automatically quite credible to the public and many viewers take everything they say as fact. When I appear on national television, I make sure that my remarks are well-researched and are backed by reputable scientific evidence. When I comment on therapies or treatments that are thought to be effective but are not well-supported by science, I make that distinction quite clear."

Lillis: "Physician celebrities could play a powerful role in increasing health literacy and promoting health, but I am sure it is very hard to do when the primary goal of a television show is to sell advertising space."

Shams: "Most physicians who are on TV and other media outlets usually have good intent at heart. They are trying to educate and promote broader public health issues."

Campbell: "I think that we as physicians must continue to have a voice in the national media. As a national media contributor, my goal is to educate, motivate, and engage viewers to inspire them to seek counsel from their own personal physicians and ultimately improve their own health."

Binns: "How we say things is just as important sometimes as what we say, and medical celebrities are gifted in saying things in a very believable way so they MUST be aware of the impact on the listener or viewer. They are often far more articulate than an individual's physician and, as such, there is great responsibility."

Campbell: "The most effective physicians on television are able to translate important medical news to the public in a way that they can easily digest and apply to their lives. We must be careful never to sensationalize findings, treatments, or drugs and we must always remind patients that there is no easy fix for all problems."

"Bottom line -- staying healthy is hard work. Drugs and other therapies are in addition to hard work, exercise, diet, and patient engagement in disease management."

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