



The Panic Virus: A True Story of Medicine, Science, and Fear, by Seth Mnookin. New York, Simon and Schuster, 2011, 448 pp., \$26.99 (hardcover).

Psychiatrists and pediatricians are still preoccupied with the question of a causal relationship between vaccines and autism spectrum disorders but not because of any burning scientific curiosity. Spurred on by antivaccine advocates, celebrities, journalists, and the now disgraced British gastroenterologist Andrew Wakefield, who falsely alleged a connection between autism and the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine, parents are delaying childhood vaccines or deciding against vaccination altogether. Herd immunity has been compromised, especially in the western United States, and diseases that had been under control—for example, Haemophilus influenza type B and measles—are staging a comeback. In 2010, the state of California declared an epidemic of pertussis. Moreover, parents are subjecting their children to a range of alternative and unproven treatments for autism, some of which can be dangerous, like chelation and antiviral and antifungal therapies. The doctors who specialize in so-called biomedical treatments for autism claim that their therapies counteract the toxins in vaccines or vaccine ingredients.

Seth Mnookin's *The Panic Virus*, along with Paul Offit's *Deadly Choices*, both released in January 2011, contains enough evidence about the origins and structure of the vaccine myth to put the causation hypothesis to rest. Mnookin takes on the antivaccine movement with the skill of a journalist and the intellectual concerns of a sociologist. In this riveting book, filled with fascinating human interest stories, he also manages to explain why, even though science has so clearly shown that the evidence argues against a relationship between vaccines and autism, so many people still believe there is one. In order to answer this question, Mnookin takes the reader through the turbulent but triumphant history of vaccines, the evolution of the autism diagnosis, and the growth of celebrity citizen science. He argues that while antivaccine hysteria has existed since the 1700s when the smallpox vaccine was first developed, the democratization of science has created a special problem in the 21st century: the Internet provides a diverse array of information but also empowers users to trust their own expertise and to find validation from individuals and groups that share their opinions.

Most Americans celebrate the new availability of information. Access to the knowledge of the intellectual elite affirms our democratic ideals. But as with Jacksonian democracy during the 1830s, when the masses became convinced that they

were just as capable and knowledgeable as doctors (and nearly put all American medical schools out of business), there is a dark side. The typical reader does not necessarily understand how to discriminate between or evaluate the validity of different sources. For many Internet users, a blogger's opinion and a peer-reviewed scientific article may have equal weight. The Internet thus empowers conspiracy theorists as well as fringe researchers who carry out junk science and disseminate research results and interpretations favorable to the antivaccine movement.

Mnookin is brutally clear in his sustained attack on every corner of the antivaccine movement, especially attorneys. He notes that the lawyers who represented the Cedillo family, whose case in vaccine court alleging that their daughter had been made autistic by the measles vaccine served as one of the test cases in the Autism Omnibus hearings, "convinced the Cedillos to act as front-line troops in a war built on lies" (p. 297). He states that Sallie Bernard's widely publicized essay "Autism: A Novel Form of Mercury Poisoning" was "novel" only in that "it was entirely fictional" (p. 145). He shows that the scientists who purported a vaccine-autism link were essentially making things up as they went along. In testimony before the vaccine court, for example, the justice department asked one of the Cedillos' central witnesses, pediatric neurologist Marcel Kinsbourne, why he did not include measles as a cause of autism in a book chapter he wrote about development disorders but made the argument in his testimony for the Cedillo case. As Mnookin reports it, Kinsbourne replied, "The hypothesis was made less than three or four weeks ago" (p. 288), just before the omnibus hearings began.

Mnookin spares no one, but he pays special attention to antivaccine activists Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Andrew Wakefield, and the former *Playboy* playmate Jenny McCarthy, whose crusade against vaccines through speeches, books, and appearances on national television has attracted a wide following. Mnookin also criticizes comedian Jim Carrey, Oprah Winfrey, Larry King, and Don Imus, among others, for voicing or giving voice to the opinion that autism and the increased prevalence of autism is a function of government, the pharmaceutical industry, and unscrupulous or neglectful doctors and public health officials.

Mnookin is particularly strong when describing the classic problem in science education: that science often moves methodically and produces results that are unacceptable to lay audiences in need of clear, simple answers. Indeed, the fear of vaccines continues to be fueled by scientists' inability to satisfy parents' concerns about the etiology of autism as well as by

the incremental nature of science itself. As scientists conduct more research, they posit more hypotheses; each hypothesis introduces another level of uncertainty and raises another theoretical possibility. Scientists are trained to accept uncertainty, but the typical parent with an autistic child is not. In other words, the antivaccine advocates want something science will never be able to provide: expeditious and total proof, as opposed to the preponderance of the evidence, and single as opposed to multifactorial causes. Mnookin knows that the best science is rarely as convincing as the words of friends, neighbors, and anecdotes. *The Panic Virus* is a superb case study in the crisis of science in a democratic society.

ROY R. GRINKER, Ph.D.
Washington, DC

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Cold War in Psychiatry: Human Factors, Secret Actors,
by Robert van Voren. Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2010, 512 pp., \$54.00.

Abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union was one of the signature human rights issues of the 1970s and 1980s. Political dissidents could find themselves suddenly deprived of freedom after a diagnosis of mental illness and incarceration in a psychiatric facility. Even querulous people who pestered local officials with complaints about minor injustices or neglected civic needs might end up on a psychiatric unit, treated with potent antipsychotic drugs, and surrounded by people with serious mental disorders. Soviet practices were widely considered to blight the reputation of psychiatry as a whole.

Robert van Voren, a young Dutch human rights activist, helped to found and headed the International Association on the Political Use of Psychiatry (today known as the Global Initiative on Psychiatry), the organization that led the fight against Soviet abuses. *Cold War in Psychiatry*, a quirky but engaging book, is van Voren's history of the struggle, a mix of personal reminiscences, accounts of interviews with key players, and documentation from newly available archives, including the files of the Stasi, the notorious East German secret police. His account centers on the effort to censure and expel the official representatives of Soviet psychiatry from the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) in 1983 and their subsequent readmission during the era of perestroika in 1989.

Abuse of psychiatry in the Soviet Union had deep roots. Psychiatric hospitalization of dissidents dates back to Czarist times, probably because it uniquely both contains and discredits threats to the regime. Communist ideology further enhanced psychiatry's value to the ruling authorities. In the "workers' paradise," where legitimate dissent was inconceivable, protest was necessarily written off as a reflection of irrationality, often of a socially dangerous nature. Moreover, leading Soviet psychiatrists promoted a nosology that was peculiarly amenable to abuse, including "sluggish schizophrenia," a disorder said to be without overt signs of psychosis other than a grandiose tendency to focus on overvalued ideas (e.g., public advocacy of democratic principles).

The earliest exposés of Soviet practices came from dissidents themselves, including the Moscow-based Working

Commission to Investigate the Use of Psychiatry for Political Purposes. By the early 1980s, efforts to combat Soviet practices focused on expelling the official Soviet psychiatric association from WPA, an approach supported by the leading Western psychiatric organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Britain. Using expulsion as a means of chastising the recalcitrant Soviets was both controversial and uncertain of success because WPA leadership and many other psychiatric associations feared fracturing world psychiatry. However, Soviet resistance to acknowledging even well-documented cases of abuse appeared to seal their fate, and rather than be expelled at the 1983 World Congress of Psychiatry in Vienna, the Soviets withdrew from WPA.

Almost immediately, the Soviets themselves and their supporters began to maneuver over their readmission at the next World Congress in 1989. In the end, though, political changes in the Soviet Union itself had more of an impact on the outcome than the vicissitudes of psychiatric politics. Mikhail Gorbachev's proclamation of *glasnost*—a new period of openness in Soviet society—led the government, often over the opposition of the psychiatric establishment, to a greater willingness to acknowledge past abuses and to abandon the use of psychiatry for the containment of dissent. The key event was Soviet agreement to a visit by a 25-member investigative team from the United States, organized under the National Institute of Mental Health auspices and led by Loren Roth, M.D., which visited the Soviet Union in early 1989.

Given the change in attitude of the Soviet government, WPA members at the World Congress in Athens later that year voted to readmit the official Soviet organization. Significantly, an organization of dissident Soviet psychiatrists also became an official member of WPA at the same time. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the political use of psychiatry waned, although reports continue to surface of abuse in other countries, such as China, where it retains its peculiar utility for the communist regime. These days, former campaigners against psychiatric abuses have turned to advocacy for psychiatric services, sounding much like their Western counterparts as they decry governmental neglect of the needs of persons with mental disorders.

The author's history of these events is a potpourri of personal recollections and biographical discursions. Special attention is given to Mel Sabshin, M.D., then APA Medical Director, and Jochen Neumann, M.D., an East German psychiatrist who, like Sabshin, was a member of the WPA Executive Committee. Sabshin, who in his younger years had communist sympathies himself, was among the strongest voices opposing Soviet practices. Neumann, still a believing communist but not insensible of the problems in the Soviet Union, was the leading representative of the Eastern bloc. Also making appearances are East German spies, the KGB, and an assortment of psychiatrists with political ambitions in world psychiatry, with both more and less admirable motivations.

Someday, a full academic history of these events will be written. But such a volume will not be able to convey nearly as well as this what it felt like to be involved in the struggle against psychiatric abuses. And it almost certainly will not be as enjoyable a read.

PAUL S. APPELBAUM, M.D.
New York, N.Y.