

REFLECTIONS IN FAMILY MEDICINE

Physician, Steel Thyself

Alan Blum, MD

A family physician who has long tried to prevent patients from falling victim to health scams and disinformation recently confronted an unexpected challenge of his own. (J Am Board Fam Med 2023;00:000–000.)

Keywords: Disinformation, Hoax

Throughout my 40-year career as a family physician, I've tried and failed hundreds of times to dissuade patients from believing that flu vaccines cause the flu. Over the past twenty-five years since the publication in *The Lancet* of the infamous article by Wakefield *et al.* on the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) vaccine,^{1,2} I've increasingly struck out when debunking parents' and grandparents' beliefs that the MMR vaccine causes autism. And almost daily for the past 3 years, I've practically begged patients not to believe that COVID-19 vaccines cause infertility or contain microchip tracking devices—or that bleach, hydroxychloroquine, or ivermectin can protect them from the virus.

Scams and schemes to deceive our patients have always existed. My favorite 19th century quack remedy warning label is “Do not put this tonic on any part of your body where you do not wish hair to grow.” But deliberate disinformation, especially via the internet and some television and radio networks, has itself become a public health threat.

Meanwhile, other kinds of scams are victimizing our patients without our realizing it. Not long ago, when a patient I'd cared for over many years did not show up for her appointment, I called to check on her. She explained that she could not afford the clinic visit copay because she had barely enough left from her Social Security check to cover the light

bill. A widow with no children, she lived a simple life. She'd never left Alabama. Thus when she told me at her next visit that she was going to Australia, I thought she was joking. Oh yes, she repeated, she was heading there to pick up the money she'd won in the Australian lottery. She had just wired the balance of her savings account to this very nice man, Peter Pierce, who had called her from Sydney with the good news and was just waiting on him to send her airline ticket and hotel reservation. Nothing I said could convince her that she was the victim of a scam.

I've shaken my head in disbelief countless times that anyone could fall for such nonsense...until it happened to me.

One morning in late January, my wife told me she had just received an urgent voicemail message on her cellphone for me to contact the Tuscaloosa County Sheriff's Office. She'd first called the number to verify that it was the Sheriff's Office, and a recording confirmed that it was. I then called and left my name and contact information in a voicemail. A few minutes later, a person with a polite West Alabama drawl called and identified himself as Officer Jordan Tingle. Referring to me as “Mr. Alan Blum,” he said he first needed to verify my name and address, which I provided. He said he also had an alternate address for me in Houston, Texas. I informed him that I last resided at that address 24 years ago.

He then read from what he said was paperwork that his office had received that morning from the court of Federal Judge Scott Coogler in which I was being cited for failure to appear in the judge's courtroom earlier that week as an expert witness in a criminal trial. Officer Tingle said that he was holding a form I'd signed a month earlier in which I'd agreed to appear in court on a certain day and

Submitted 19 March 2023; revised 5 April 2023; accepted 17 April 2023.

This is the Ahead of Print version of the article.

From the Department of Family, Internal, and Rural Medicine, University of Alabama School of Medicine, Tuscaloosa, AL, USA (AB).

Funding: None.

Conflict of interest: None.

Corresponding author: Alan Blum, MD, Department of Family, Internal, and Rural Medicine, University of Alabama School of Medicine, Tuscaloosa, AL 35401 (E-mail: ablum@ua.edu).

time. He asked if I recalled signing such a document, and when I said I did not, he assured me that this was no doubt a terrible mix-up that his office could easily resolve with a handwriting analysis. If it were determined that the signatures did not match, then I would be entitled to file a felony criminal complaint of forgery that his office would pursue. He'd also arrange for a Zoom interview with the judge to resolve the matter and expunge the record.

In the meantime, unfortunately, he was required to inform me of the 2 citations against me that had been referred by the court for action by the Sheriff's Office. He instructed me to get a pen and paper to write down the information and waited until I said I was ready to continue.

The first citation was for "Failure to Appear (FTA)," and my file number was, "now please write this down, AL-23-CV-2214," for which I would need to remit payment at this time of "the Judge's discretionary \$1500.00 balance."

The second citation was for "Contempt of Court (COC)," and my file number was "AL-23-CV-1171," with "a \$1000.00 balance."

I asked if he could provide me with a description of the court case, but he said he was not permitted to do so because of a "suppression gag order." When I expressed doubt about this by saying that none of the information made sense to me and that I had no knowledge of any such court proceeding, he said, "Sir, all I am permitted to tell you is that it relates to a case of sexual abuse of a juvenile." As incredulous as I was about Officer Tingle and his story by this point, I never doubted that he was with the police. And I was feeling increasingly anxious and threatened.

He then said he needed to proceed with the 3-step process to assure that "the Office of the Clerk of the Federal Court, Mrs. Edna Shepherd," would be able to receive the information that my "balance had been settled." He assured me that once the matter was resolved showing that I had not been in violation of the citations, I would receive a full refund plus "federal collateral postage."

As he began asking me to write down the 6-digit log-in number to start the payment process for the \$2500 in fines, I said that I'd prefer to come to the Sheriff's Office to read the citations. Although at the outset of his call Officer Tingle had assured me that this was not a criminal matter that required my consulting with an attorney, he now informed me that were I to appear at the Sheriff's Office without

having attempted to resolve the matter through the online system of "virtual platforms," I would be taken into custody for violating the suppression gag order by attempting to discuss the case with other individuals. The citations would then be changed to "frozen status," my name would appear in a public record for violating the orders of a federal judge, and I would have to plead my case in court, for which I would need an attorney.

When I then told him I needed to get to my office and asked if I could call back later, Officer Tingle calmly warned me that if I ended the conversation without resolving the matter, he would be required to turn over my file to "CID, the Criminal Investigation Division." He added that if I was uncomfortable with the virtual payment platforms that he had been about to explain, then there was a "cash alternative," by which I could go to any "federally approved money transfer service" to send payment.

Only then did I realize I'd been talking either to a modern-day Al Kelly, the greatest double-talk artist, or the successor to the foremost jargon-spouting impersonator of experts, "Professor" Irwin Corey, both of whom I'd seen fool many members of the audience on the *Ed Sullivan Show* when I was growing up.

"Officer" Tingle was in midsentence when I finally hung up on him after nearly 30 nerve-racking minutes. I immediately looked up the telephone number for the federal courthouse and learned that Scott Coogler is indeed the name of the Chief Judge. When I phoned his chambers and told my story to his staff attorney, she related that a week earlier she'd received an almost identical call from another local physician. She recommended that I report the scam to the FBI.

Only while filing my complaint did I learn that in 2022 nearly 60 million Americans lost almost \$40 billion to telephone scammers.^{3,4} An online search led me to a press release last year by the Colorado Medical Society alerting physicians to the exact same scam that had nearly lured me in.⁵

Physicians like me believe we are immune to becoming victims of fraud because we consider ourselves intelligent and well-informed. The American Association for Retired Persons warns that being smart and logical only makes one more vulnerable.⁶ As a magician during high school and college, I learned about the art of misdirection. In the same way that I saw that some of the smartest people were the easiest to fool, I've now experienced firsthand how scammers can overcome our logical thinking.

Before I roll my eyes or shake my head again on hearing that patients have been duped by a telephone fraudster or online purveyor of health disinformation, I will try sharing my own recent humbling experience with them.

References

1. Wakefield AJ, Murch SH, Anthony A, et al. Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. *Lancet* 1998;351:637–41.
2. Retraction. Ileal-lymphoid-nodular hyperplasia, non-specific colitis, and pervasive developmental disorder in children. *Lancet* 2010;375:445.
3. Thapa A. How phone scammers tricked Americans out of tens of billions of dollars in 2022. Available from: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/05/how-phone-scammers-tricked-americans-out-of-tens-of-billions-of-dollars-in-2022.html#:~:text=Trucaller%2C%20which%20makes%20an%20app,nearly%20%2440%20billion%20in%20tot.>
4. McCart C. 35+ Phone spam statistics for 2017–2022. Available from: <https://www.comparitech.com/blog/information-security/phone-spam-statistics/#:~:text=59.49%20million%20US%20residents%20lost%20money%20from%20a%20phone%20scam%20in%202021.>
5. Colorado Medical Society: Health professionals are being targeted in law enforcement scams. January 13, 2022. Available from: <https://www.cms.org/articles/health-professionals-are-being-targeted-in-law-enforcement-scams>.
6. Weston L. Think you're too smart to fall for a scam? That makes you more vulnerable. *app.com (USA Today affiliate)*, August 15, 2019.