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The ‘hole’ in the pantry story: should Penguin have validated Belle Gibson’s cancer claims?

Would it ever be responsible to legitimise the story that someone “healed themselves” of cancer through diet? Jan Hallbæck

Australia is no stranger to a literary hoax or deception, from the “Em Malley” affair to the falsified backgrounds of Helen Darville and Norma Khouri.

Social media entrepreneur Belle Gibson, developer of The Whole Pantry “health, wellness and lifestyle” app, has now been revealed as the first to fabricate a miraculous recovery from metastasised cancer. Last month, the questions raised both by those who have known Gibson and medical experts began to taint the legitimacy of Gibson’s lucrative app and the cookbook she published in October last year.

Gibson has now confessed that she invented the story of her successful battle against malignant brain cancer using alternative therapies. No doubt Gibson’s personal story was a major hook in the publicity for her brand and helped to drive more than 300,000 sales of the app alone.

Penguin, publishers of The Whole Pantry, have stated they did not check the validity of Gibson’s cancer account as they did not see that it was “necessary” given that the book is “a collection of recipes”.

The book, which has since been pulled, does, however, contain a 3,000-word preface that is devoted to answering questions about Gibson’s cancer diagnosis and how she came to the decision to “heal herself” instead of continuing with the prescribed chemotherapy and radiotherapy.
In answer to the latter question, she contrasts her experience of vomiting after medical treatment with the approach she devised through reading articles on the internet and speaking to people. Her solution involved “nutrition, patience, determination and love – as well as salt, vitamin and Ayurvedic treatments, craniosacral therapy, oxygen therapy, colonics”.

Recipe books are proving to be far less benign subject matter than publishers might have imagined.

Also last month, the publication of celebrity chef Pete Evans’s paleo-inspired cookbook for infants, Bubba Yum Yum, was delayed and then cancelled. The book includes recipes for bone broths that appear to be recommended as substitutes for breast milk or formula, and which doctors have warned might pose a risk to babies under six months old.

What is the responsibility of a major publishing house, then, to check the credentials and claims of its authors’ biographies? Or even the validity of particular health claims, such as alternative therapies for cancer or fad diets?

After all, the standing of a publisher can confer authority on a published work. We know there is a continuum between self-publishing houses such as Trafford, who published the much-mocked anti-vaccine polemic Melanie’s Marvellous Measles, and respected academic presses that require books to pass expert review.

Both Apple and Penguin would have perceived the benefits of an association with an “inspirational” social media star who claimed to donate a significant amount of her company’s earnings to charity.

It is troubling that either reputable company would wish to promote someone whose profile and theories rested on entirely unproven claims about the power of food, mindset, vitamins, oxygen and colonic irrigation to cure malignant brain tumours that usually have a poor prognosis.

People only expressed alarm at Gibson’s recovery story once it became evident that it could not be true if the accusation that she was never diagnosed with cancer was factual.

Yet would it have ever been responsible to publicise and legitimise the story that someone “healed themselves” of cancer through diet? While a good diet certainly does not harm a cancer patient and the role of diet in the development of particular cancers, such as bowel cancer, is established, diet-based “cures” have not been scientifically validated.

Encouraging cancer sufferers to have faith in unproven cures is ethically problematic, purveying false hope and potentially drawing sufferers away from treatment that could be efficacious.

Moreover, the suggestion that a young woman with no medical or scientific education or training was able to devise a cure for her brain cancer through some hours spent googling the topic (and her discovery of the “detoxification properties of lemons”) is preposterous.

Suppressing ideas that are not accepted by contemporary thinking would thwart new knowledge. But, as Patrick Stokes points out in his widely-read article No, you’re not entitled to your opinion, the ability to voice an opinion that is difficult to argue for is different to having views “treated as serious candidates for the truth”.

If the foundation of a book is so far outside of accepted knowledge and little evidence can be
mustered in support of it then publishers might not wish to affect their reputation through publication. For instance, Keith Windschuttle’s controversial three-volume The Fabrication of Aboriginal History is self-published.

As Belle Gibson’s recent admission of deception proves, the core dilemma with the publication of The Whole Pantry was that the influence of the author rested upon unverifiable claims about curing cancer with alternative therapies.

*This article was updated on 23 April 2015 to reflect Belle Gibson’s confession that she lied about suffering from cancer.*