

Discourse analysis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder on the Internet

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ABSTRACT

The aim of our research is to analyse the Polish discourse about ADHD in terms of its content and potential harmfulness for children and healthcare generally. Biased or highly emotional articles could potentially cause a lack of appropriate treatment for children, or harmful misunderstandings of their condition. The subjects of the study were popular non-scientific internet health and parenting themed websites. They were manually analysed in terms of the information contained about the aetiology and treatment of ADHD. The analysis shows, that fringe and pseudoscientific theories are ubiquitous and very highly ranked by search engines compared to other Polish content concerning the topic. Many sources uncritically recommend eliminative diets, homeopathic therapy etc., as a superior alternative to the established medical guidelines. Methylphenidate, which is the only dopaminergic drug available on the Polish market, is often presented as an Amphetamine derivative, suggesting it is a drug of abuse, which causes negative connotations. Another, common misconception suggests, that ADHD is not a „real” condition, often supported by a false anecdote of the person who discovered ADHD having admitted this fact on their deathbed. ADHD is widely misunderstood, and the Polish Internet contains a lot of seemingly reliable and professional websites, displaying misleading and false information about the disorder. The most important problem are: suggesting ADHD pharmacotherapy with CSN stimulants as harmful and ineffective, contrary to the current scientific knowledge suggesting ADHD is not a real disorder, and should not be treated at all.

METHODOLOGY

- Manual analysis of the most popular Polish health-related sites
- We chose the sites based on their popularity and their ranking in popular search engines. Sites focusing on alternative medicine were omitted, as they are mostly read by people already interested in alternative therapies for ADHD. Our goal was to analyse the mainstream discourse.

RESULTS

The first site of the Startpage results (a search engine returning Google results without personalised content) were only strictly medical sites, containing basic information about ADHD, and describing most common treatments.

An encouraging sign was, that most articles made note of the difficulties in diagnosing girls with ADHD, and their symptoms often being divergent from the boys'. The treatment of ADHD is also commonly described as being often necessary for the proper functioning of a diagnosed child. Pharmacotherapy with CSN stimulants is shown as one of the fundamentals of a proper therapeutic process, which cannot however replace a good parent-child relationship.

There is, however, a worrying lack of specifics concerning pharmacotherapy, and it is also sometimes shown as the last resort, used for the most difficult cases only.

The second most popular group of websites containing information about ADHD were popular, multitopic sites with parenting, health and diet columns. The information presented often proved to be contradictory, even within a single article, however, most follow very similar patterns. Some treat ADHD as a disorder and proposed a therapy, others negate the very existence of ADHD and suggest that pharmacotherapy is a conspiracy by pharmaceutical companies. The most common therapies suggested for ADHD were various diets.

The most common diets described were:

- Carbohydrate intake reduction. Sugar intake was supposed to „deepen the symptoms of ADHD, and even cause a healthy child to appear as if they were sick”
- Eliminative diets (nuts, wheat, milk, soy, eggs, fish, shellfish, gluten) – one example was a diet containing only a small number of products, including rice, turkey and carrots. It was claimed to greatly reduce and even eliminate the symptoms. A quote reads „The parents were shocked, and their children said that they feel as if a madness had left their heads” (<https://zdrowie.dziennik.pl/diety/artykuly/329094,to-dziala-specjalna-dieta-leczy-adhd.html>)
- Avoiding products containing: mercury, salicylates (apples, cherries, tomatoes, oranges, grapes), artificial colorants and artificial flavourings, sodium benzoate, sulphur dioxide, vanillin, aspartame, caffeine Using probiotics, dietary supplementation (fatty omega-3 acids, zinc, iron), CBD oil, aromatherapy
- Homeopathy (<https://mamotoja.pl/tajemnicza-sila-homeopatii.choroby-malego-dziecka-artykul,5671,r1p1.html>)

Those websites often negate the effectiveness and efficacy of pharmacotherapy, use the example of the US as a country, where children are „numbed” en masse by „tranquilizers”, and promote a moral panic, based on methylphenidate’s connotations with amphetamine, a common drug of abuse.

QUOTES (Translation work was done by the authors)

The society is blinded by pills and other drugs. Instead of taking care of the root problems and solving them, people prefer to chase magical pills for every ailment, and then others, for the side effects of the former. However, most illnesses are much better treated by recognising the underlying causes, and eliminating them, so that the organism can regenerate on its own; which is a capability written in its genetic code. Our body can neutralise chemical substances, correct defects or heal wounds, we just have to let it, by maintaining proper dietary hygiene. (...) amphetamines and stimulants, (...) are supposed to help, however, in reality (because of their side effects) they become potential threats. No one knows if prolonged usage of those pharmaceuticals doesn't increase, for example, the risk of cancer in adulthood. We can't discount this possibility. It seems, that adults are more likely to risk the health and lives of their children. than to correct their dietary habits. It mostly stems from ignorance, not ill will. Studies showing the effects of the proper diet in treating ADHD are still ignored by physicians, who see drugs as the only right way of treating this illness. (Miasto Dzieci, <https://miastodzieci.pl/czytelnia/adhd-bez-lekow-dieta-dziecka-z-adhd/>).

Even the discoverer of ADHD – psychiatrist Leon Eisenberg – admitted on his deathbed, that he made up the disorder, and he did it for money only. He had a high position, and was a guru of pediatric psychiatry in the USA, and had connections in task forces, which classify diseases, and which are taken seriously in the whole world. For a long time, he was a chairman of the American Psychiatric Association himself, a body, which decides on the psychiatric disorder classification. However, the media have hidden this information from the public for a long time, so that the sales of the ADHD drugs don't drop. Sadly, even though the lie has been out for a long time, a lot of parents still don't know the truth, and give their children harmful drugs. (<https://polki.pl/rodzina/dziecko,adhd-dlaczego-nie-wolno-podawac-dzieciom-psychotropow,10420593,artykul.html>)

CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis has shown, that it's relatively easy to encounter information about ADHD on the Internet, most of it is however not comprehensive and it treats topics such as pharmacotherapy superficially.

During more in-depth searches, it's easy to find a very popular lifestyle or parenting sites, where there are many articles promoting unconventional therapies, negating the existence of ADHD, or exacerbating the moral panic concerning the stimulant medications. The biggest problem is, that those sites cover a wide range of topics, and it's easy to find that type of information by chance. They are popular sites, with a wide audience, and are not immediately associated with conspiracy theories or alternative medicine.

The result of the great number of articles promoting alternative treatments of ADHD, could be causing, or exacerbating an existing fear of pharmacotherapy in parents of children with ADHD, and ultimately a decision to discontinue the treatment, which could prove dangerous to the child. This is an even bigger concern, given that in Poland, pharmacotherapy is already the second-line treatment, and there is a wide range of difficulties and requirements for prescribing methylphenidate.

Another area of concern is introducing eliminative diets without professional supervision, which can easily lead to nutritional deficiencies, or unpredicted changes in metabolism and growth in a vulnerable population, which are children. Polish Internet contains much useful and reliable information about ADHD – even more than the authors anticipated. However, the harmful information can be more popular, as it appears on media with a high reach, and can be more convincing, with its definite answers and emotionally charged content. Those factors can influence parents even more, as many of them are emotionally vulnerable and feel lost in coping with their child's condition. That, combined with a relatively widespread distrust of medical professionals, in the authors' opinion, can have surprisingly wide-ranging consequences.

SOURCES

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