The website of osteopathic physician and alternative medicine advocate Joseph Mercola, which has published false claims about standard medical practices such as vaccinations.

Ownership and Financing

The site is owned by Mercola through limited liability companies Mercola.com, LLC, which is based in Utah, and Mercola Health Resources, LLC, based in southwest Florida. Mercola is the owner and director of both companies.

Mercola is a proponent of alternative medicine and an osteopathic physician. A doctor of osteopathic medicine is a fully licensed physician who must complete similar training and exam requirements as a doctor of medicine. The major difference, according to the Mayo Clinic, is that an osteopathic physician may "provide manual medicine therapies, such as spinal manipulation or massage therapy, as part of their treatment."

Mercola.com generates revenue from sales from shop.mercola.com, the site's online store, which sells dietary supplements, food and beverages, sunscreen, essential oils, exercise equipment, and household products.

According to a December 2019 article in The Washington Post, Mercola is a major financial supporter of the National Vaccine Information Center, an anti-vaccine group. His $2.9 million in donations since 2010 accounts for about 40 percent of the center's funding, the Post reported.

The site publishes advertisements for products sold in its online store.

Content

The site's mission statement says that it aims to provide "the most up-to-date natural health information and resources that will most benefit you" and expose "corporate, government and mass media hype that diverts you away from what is truly best for your health and often to a path that leads straight into an early grave."

Mercola.com publishes stories on health, nutrition, fitness, food, and pet-related topics. The site offers nutrition and exercise plans and recipes. It also includes directories of common diseases and a "food facts" section that provides nutritional information about common foods. Typical headlines on the site include "The Many Benefits of Meditation," "Hazards in Your Cellphone," and "Top Five Tips to Avoid Dangerous Chemicals."

Several "special info" divisions of the site are devoted to subjects such as aspartame, cancer, fluoride, GMOs, vaccines, and vitamin D. The site is generally skeptical of traditional medical practices and government regulators, such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Credibility

Mercola.com has repeatedly promoted false or unsubstantiated claims on topics that include the Wuhan coronavirus outbreak and the debunked theory that vaccines can cause autism.

For example, a February 2020 article titled "Novel Coronavirus — The Latest Pandemic Scare," suggested the source of the outbreak was a Chinese government-run laboratory in Wuhan, China. "In January 2018, China's first maximum security virology laboratory (biosafety level 4) designed for the study of the world's most dangerous pathogens opened its doors — in Wuhan," the article said. "Is it pure coincidence that Wuhan City is now the epicenter of this novel coronavirus infection?"

While it is true that a lab at the Wuhan Institute of Virology works with dangerous pathogens, there is no evidence backing the suggestion that the new strain of coronavirus came from that lab. A February 2020 study published in the journal Nature found that the virus is "96% percent identical at the whole-genome level to a bat coronavirus."
The same article also suggested, without providing evidence, that the coronavirus outbreak was pre-planned to benefit pharmaceutical companies. "Whatever the source, the hysteria being drummed up follows a now well-worn pattern where the population is kept in a perpetual state of anxiety and fear about microbes so that drug companies (aided by federal health officials) can come to the rescue with yet another expensive (and potentially mandatory) drug or vaccine," the article said.

Mercola also suggested that the outbreak was timed to coincide with discussions about the U.S. federal budget. "January and February appear to be a favorite time to launch a global disease scare with the dutiful assistance of corporatized media," the article stated. "It's convenient, seeing how usually by the first Monday in February every year (Feb. 3, 2020), the president sends the U.S. Congress the administration's budget requesting funds to be allocated to federal agencies for the next fiscal year's budget (Oct. 1, 2020 - Sept. 30, 2021). Each time there's a public health scare, the Pharma and public health lobby is able to vie for a larger slice of taxpayer money to pay for drug and vaccine development."

Mercola’s chief editor, Janet Selvig, did not respond to an email from NewsGuard seeking comment on this article.

Mercola.com has also published articles suggesting that an expanded childhood vaccination schedule had increased the prevalence of autism. For example, a February 2019 article entitled “WHO, Pharma, Gates and Government: Who's Calling the Shots?” said a World Health Organization (WHO) report naming “vaccine hesitancy” as a global health threat "cannot explain why so many highly vaccinated children in the U.S. today are sicker, not healthier today: ‘1 child in 6 is learning disabled and 1 in 40 has autism.’"

Other stories promoting the debunked link between autism and vaccinations include September 2018’s “How to End the Autism Epidemic,” in which Mercola stated, “I believe vaccines can play a role in autism, although it’s certainly not the sole factor or trigger.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and many other health and science authorities, including the U.K. National Health Service and WHO, have repeatedly stated that there is no link between vaccines and autism, based on an abundance of scientific evidence.

When asked about the site’s claims on vaccinations, Selvig sent NewsGuard eight links in February 2019 to research and legal documents that discussed a connection between certain vaccines and neurological inflammation. However, none of the documents proved a causal link between autism and vaccinations. For example, Selvig said that a 1991 Institute of Medicine Vaccine Safety Committee publication stated that vaccines for diphtheria, pertussis, and tetanus “can cause acute and chronic encephalopathy … and symptoms of autism are part of the chronic neurological damage [vaccinated children] exhibit.” While the group’s publication discusses encephalopathy as a rare side effect of the vaccine, known as DPT, it notes that “the committee found no evidence bearing on a causal relation between DPT vaccine and autism.”

After NewsGuard published its review of Mercola.com, the site said it had added a disclaimer to more than 380 articles on controversial topics such as vaccines, which editor Selvig said in a March 2019 email was intended to “ensure that readers can clearly see that the piece is a referenced commentary.” The note reads in part, “The following referenced information contains opinion and perspective on a health topic related to vaccine science, policy, law or ethics that is being discussed in public forums.” It includes links to information about vaccine safety from organizations including the U.S. National Institutes of Health, the WHO, and the CDC.

Mercola.com stories that cite dangers of common substances often misrepresent results of credible scientific studies. For example, a December 2018 post headlined “5 Foods and Consumer Products You Can Find Aluminum In: Here Is Why It Is Bad for You,” says that “the average adult in the U.S. consumes about 7 to 9 mg of aluminum per day in food” and “we now have documented evidence that long-term exposure to aluminum can damage brain tissue and lead to degenerative disease,” such as Alzheimer’s. The post did not cite research to back its claim on the dangers of aluminum.

Selvig sent NewsGuard several links in February 2019 to scientific articles she said backed the post’s claims. But a NewsGuard review of these studies found that the Mercola blog post was misleading and omitted context. The CDC’s statistic on average aluminum consumption
was correct, but the post omitted the World Health Organization's estimate that a person can safely consume 1 mg per kilogram of body weight — meaning the average amount of aluminum an adult consumes in a day is safe for anyone who weighs over 20 pounds. Neither the World Health Organization or the CDC have said that aluminum levels that the average person is exposed to are harmful.

The Mercola post also drew a direct link between aluminum exposure and Alzheimer's disease, citing a 2016 case study that described a man who had been occupationally exposed to aluminum and contracted early-onset Alzheimer's. However, the post cites sources, such as a 2017 study published in Deutsches Arzteblatt, a German medical magazine, that directly refute the connection between Alzheimer's and aluminum.

Mercola has been criticized by physicians and scientists and sanctioned by regulatory agencies for promoting unsubstantiated theories in Mercola.com articles and in descriptions of products sold through the site.

In 2016, Mercola agreed to issue refunds to more than 1,300 customers who bought indoor tanning beds sold on his website after the U.S. Federal Trade Commission sued, alleging he made false claims about the beds' safety. Articles cited in the FTC's 2016 lawsuit falsely claimed that tanning beds provide health benefits, including "slashing your risk of cancer" and "reversing the appearance of aging."

A page about risk factors for skin cancer on the CDC's website notes that "every time you tan, you increase your risk of getting skin cancer." Studies cited by the American Academy of Dermatology estimate that the use of tanning beds may cause over 400,000 cases of skin cancer in the U.S. every year.

In an April 2016 post about the lawsuit on Mercola.com, Mercola defended his claims about tanning bed safety, stating: "In the end, it's not a wise use of resources fighting the FTC, so I chose to settle and agree to no longer sell my UV systems in order to continue educating you about the very real health benefits of UV exposure." His remarks were echoed in a January 2019 statement by the site's chief editor, Janet Selvig, who told NewsGuard that "controlled exposure using specific spectrums of artificial light can be beneficial."

The FDA has sent Mercola at least four warnings since 2005 for making unapproved claims about drugs sold in the site's store. A warning letter sent in February 2005 referenced Mercola's descriptions of chlorophyll, a type of algae, as a supplement that helps "fight cancer" and "normalize your blood sugar and blood pressure." According to the American Cancer Society, studies measuring the efficacy of chlorophyll in inhibiting cancer growth have only been conducted using cell cultures and animals, not human beings.

Because Mercola.com has repeatedly promoted false health information, NewsGuard has determined that it repeatedly publishes false content and does not gather and present information responsibly.

The site posts corrections to stories, generally at the top of articles, but has failed to correct multiple articles making false claims, such as those promoting the debunked link between vaccines and autism. Because the website has not corrected content that NewsGuard has determined is false, NewsGuard has determined that the site does not regularly issue corrections.

Although the site added a note to several vaccine-related articles saying there are differing opinions on the issue, Mercola.com did not correct the stories' claims, which is why NewsGuard's determination that the site has repeatedly published false content and does not gather and present information responsibly remains the same.

Beginning at the end of October 2018, the site began labeling some stories as fact-checked, stating in its guidelines: "All Mercola articles are fact-checked, vetted and verified using Associated Press and Society of Professional Journalists journalism standards. Therefore, when it comes to the topics we cover, we fact-check every claim we make, and clearly identify sources, vet the people we interview and write about, and verify all medical information with referenced, hyperlinked medical literature sources." Selvig told NewsGuard in February 2019 that the articles had always been fact-checked, but that the site had just begun to label such posts.

Mercola.com's articles generally include opinions that favor alternative medicine. That perspective is disclosed on its About Dr. Mercola page, which says that the site's audience includes "anyone struggling with a
health issue who is seeking alternatives to conventional health methods. ... The existing medical establishment is responsible for killing and permanently injuring millions of Americans, but the surging numbers of visitors to Mercola.com since I began the site in 1997 — we are now routinely among the top 10 health sites on the internet — convinces me that you, too, are fed up with their deception.” The page added, “You want practical health solutions without the hype, and that’s what I offer.”

Because Mercola.com’s articles reflect a pro-alternative medicine perspective that it discloses, NewsGuard has determined that the site meets its standard for handling the difference between news and opinion responsibly. Headlines generally reflect the content of articles. Stories that contain false or misleading information, such as an article about the FDA declaring homeopathic drugs illegal, tend to avoid making false statements in headlines. The headline of that article framed its announcement about the FDA as a question — “All Homeopathic Products Now Illegal?” — rather than a statement of fact. After NewsGuard published its review, the site appended a clarification to this article, saying it “reflects our interpretation and opinion,” but did not change the headline or the contents of the story.

Transparency

The site discloses its ownership by Mercola on the “About Dr. Mercola” page, stating that he funds the website and is “not handcuffed to any advertisers, silent partners or corporate parents.”

The site clearly distinguishes between advertising and editorial content.

Stories that are attributed to specific content creators list Mercola as the author. Mercola.com does not provide a list of any other staff members, but the description of the site’s fact-checking protocol that accompanies articles includes a biography and contact information for a content researcher and editor.

The site lists Selvig’s name and title as chief editor in an “About Dr. Mercola” section on the site.

History

Mercola began publishing articles about alternative health treatments on Mercola.com in 1997. He ran the Dr. Mercola Natural Health Center in Illinois until 2013, when he closed the clinic in order to focus on his website.

Editor’s Note: This Nutrition Label was updated on March 2, 2020, with additional examples of content on the site. Its rating was changed to reflect NewsGuard’s determination that, contrary to an earlier version of this label, Mercola.com meets NewsGuard’s standard for handling the difference between news and opinion responsibly. The criteria checklist has been adjusted accordingly.

In 2019, this Nutrition Label was updated to include changes Mercola.com made to label some of its content, and its rating was changed to reflect NewsGuard’s determination that Mercola.com now meets NewsGuard’s standard for revealing who is in charge.

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Send feedback to NewsGuard: Click Here

Sources

Ownership and Financing

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Content

https://aspartame.mercola.com/
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