

# Lab to Smartphone

## The Expert and the Advocate: Cousins, not Twins

David Rettew, MD

*A few years back, I was asked by a state legislative committee to give testimony about a bill that would fund some netting under a bridge that had become somewhat of a suicide hotspot in our state. Like a lot of mental health professionals, I cared deeply about preventing suicide and was inclined to support initiatives that tried to help. During the testimony, however, I took pains to lay out what I thought was a very balanced perspective on what is and isn't known about these suicide prevention efforts. The next day, I received a cordial but somewhat unusual email from the committee clerk: the committee was very grateful for the extremely useful testimony I had given but really wanted to know whether or not I actually favored the proposed legislation.*

Child psychiatrists and other medical and mental health professionals are increasingly “getting out there” when it comes to engaging the public and the media about important topics. This is a very good development and one of the reasons this *Lab to Smartphone* column was created. Frequently, our task is to synthesize scientific information that can be technical, inconsistent and even contradictory in a way that is understandable and even entertaining. In this way, we combine our training and direct experience as clinicians, researchers, and teachers to perform the role of the wise and objective expert.

But psychiatrists, as it turns out, are also human beings with emotions, passions, beliefs and, yes, biases. Inevitably in the course of laying out the data and arguments to help others form opinions, we develop some of our own. When that happens, some of that same clinical experience and research can start getting used not only to explain what is happening but also to encourage what *should* be happening. As the goal shifts from one

of informing to one of persuading, the role of the expert slowly gives way to the role of the advocate.

Fortunately, wearing both hats of expert and advocate is usually not a problem. Indeed, the 2 roles can be quite complementary, as even a balanced account of what is known about a particular subject requires some kind of conclusion in the end. For example, a child psychiatrist who studies the effects of exercise on the brain might conclude, as an expert, that there overall is a positive effect. That person may then quite logically advocate on behalf of some group trying to bring exercise-related programs or education into a school.

But sometimes, there can be tension between the roles of expert and advocate. Once an expert states a conclusion publicly, especially on a more controversial topic, people respond to it: some with praise and agreement, others with condemnation and even insults. The ones who agree often want to hear more by way of articles, lectures, and maybe even entire book. Soon, the expert is known not just for their *knowledge* on a particular topic, but their *position* on it.

When was the last time you read a research paper from a noted expert that provided evidence *against* their typical position? It doesn't happen often. Basically, those who have staked out the scientific opinion that SSRIs are dangerous, cognitive-behavioral therapy is awesome, cannabis is medicine, or videogames are bad for developing brains (etc, etc), have tended to stay there for the rest of their career. Even more astounding is that the data they actually produce somehow always seem to support that perspective too. Does this mean that many of our prized researchers are intentionally manipulating their data? Absolutely not—but it does suggest that scientific bias can work its way in through channels other than paid talks and consultant gigs from pharmaceutical companies.

The partnership between experts and advocacy organizations can also be awkward at times. Mostly there are shared perspectives and common causes but then there's the question of how to handle that valid point from the other side or that thorny study that contradicts the advocacy group's central message? The expert role demands that such information be considered and weighed. The advocate, however, sees opposing information as something to be ignored and, if that isn't possible, refuted. Start changing or even moderating your views and you risk angering and losing your colleagues. Perhaps even worse is the possibility of being seen as weak or (gasp) "wishy washy."

Those who start with more moderate positions on debatable topics may be particularly vulnerable to the expert versus advocate pressure. Media outlets generally gravitate to conflict and drama. Feature a discussion on a controversial topic, and what you typically get are two people with opinions at the extreme ends of either side who won't or can't acknowledge any legitimacy to any of the arguments from the other person. The poor scientific expert in the middle who sees merits and pitfalls with both extremes often is pushed to get "off the fence" with polarizing questions designed to fit complex dimensional issues into little binary boxes.

What to do about this? The solution is certainly not to abandon our important role as advocates towards some

kind of robotic broker of scientific information (even if that were possible). There are just too many important causes out there that need action. What we can do, however, is acknowledge the daylight that can exist between being an expert and being an advocate and be more fully aware of where we are at any given time. Theoretically at least, psychiatrists should be pretty decent at this, as we do spend time in training thinking about how we filter information through "our stuff."

Being successful at this role clarification doesn't mean that we necessarily have to lose effectiveness as an advocate, although at times it might. Using the analogy of an old-fashioned scale, we can remember that it tips just as far to one side whether there is a lopsided difference in weight between the two sides or just a tiny difference. Decisive actions are not dependent on extreme beliefs.

These reflections come not from a person who has mastered these challenges but as one who has struggled with them. Maintaining success as an advocate for issues I care about while not overly compromising the integrity of the expert will continue to be a demanding balancing act for years to come. I've stumbled before and undoubtedly will again. The goal here is not some kind of state of pure expert nirvana but rather a continued pursuit of positive change while maintaining a healthy dose of introspection and humility.

### About the Author

**David C. Rettew, MD**, is an associate professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine and the Medical Director for the Child Division of the Vermont Department of Mental Health. He is author of the book *Child Psychiatry: New Thinking About the Boundary Between Traits and Illness* and the "ABCs of Child Psychiatry" blog on the *Psychology Today* website. You can follow him on Twitter at **@PediPsych**.

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### To Participate in the Lab to Smartphone Column

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