

## “OK...if you say so”

There is a famous quote in sports by the late great Jack Buck (father of Joe), who in 1988 was in shock after witnessing Kirk Gibson’s famous World Series home run: “I don’t believe what I just saw!” I think we have all had a moment or two like that in our careers, in response to good and bad events...one of them came over the July 4th holiday for me and it blew my mind.

My neighbor was hosting a pre-fireworks party and invited us over. A San Diego native and an avid surfer, he is covered in AKs despite his good looks, and his lovely wife is usually more tanned than not, so in addition to some snacks I brought over sunscreen for their upcoming trip. They were very appreciative and we had a short chat about photoprotection that ended after 30 seconds when they put the sunscreens on their kitchen counter. Sounds uneventful, right?

Within a few minutes I hear one of the guest’s adult daughters telling her mom about the sunscreens, but not in a way I would expect at a party: “Isn’t this one of those dangerous sunscreens that causes cancer? Who would bring this to one of their friends? This is so scary!” And then the response from the mother: “Wow did you see this, it has oxybenzone in it...these sunscreens are worse than cigarettes!” This is at a July 4th party and I don’t know who these people are...and I can’t believe what I just saw!

Eventually the wave of sunscreen rage reached me, the dermatologist responsible for this heinous crime of spreading malignancy to my innocent neighbors, and far be it for me to have come to this party prepared to debate sunscreen safety and the brainwashing of the Environmental Working Group (EWG). However, unlike the usual me who would have ripped the lid off a screaming debate and come out swinging, I sat back and absorbed the wrath of the enraged but “well-informed” mother and daughter “granolas.” I thanked them for sharing, told them about recent developments in Hawaii that these agents are harmful to the coral (ref: Julie Harper’s great lecture at Hawaii Derm), and made the point that my references are not on chat rooms or from sponsored splinter factions like the EWG. And when the mother told me I should be ashamed as a dermatologist for not knowing enough about sunscreen safety, I said, “Thanks, but today is my day off,” and headed out to the fireworks.

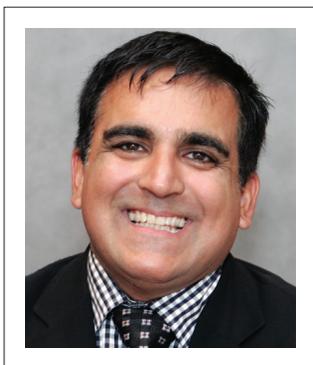
Holy moly, is there any sanctuary left? I guess these sunscreen fanatics are our equivalent of anti-vaxers, but my issue is not so much with these “outraged consumers” as it is with how this incomplete education and biased information continues to be more persuasive than our medical exper-

tise and peer-reviewed science. What is it that medicine has done to alienate the patient base to run straight into the brainwashing of the wrong sources? We can talk all day about facts, about how the splinter groups are also bought and sold, and about how patient safety is our responsibility—but no matter what, we seem to be the bad guys. At least this time I didn’t take the bait and make a scene at the party, but what happens to those of us who are constantly “on the job” and crusading for all that is sacred in dermatology? Will we know when to drop the sword of education and walk away? We’ve all been there once...maybe twice.

If you haven’t read the most recent statement on sunscreens from AAD President Dr. Henry Lim, who knows more about photoprotection than anyone else could hope to, read it ([dermwire.com/2017/05/22/statement-from-aad-president-henry-w-lim-md-faad-on-the-safety-of-sunscreen](http://dermwire.com/2017/05/22/statement-from-aad-president-henry-w-lim-md-faad-on-the-safety-of-sunscreen)) and memorize this line: “Current scientific data does not support claims that sunscreen ingredients are toxic or a hazard to human health. Rather, evidence supports the benefits of applying sunscreen to minimize short- and long-term damage to the skin from the sun’s harmful ultraviolet rays.”

Everyone needs to remind these sunscreen fanatics, like the one who confronted me, that the EWG is nothing more than a scaremonger group that is more on the take for endorsements than any company or agency that gets a bad reputation (All of pharma, for example!). This quote in an article made me laugh because the soccer moms and granolas who run to “natural” don’t realize they are just victims of the power of marketing: “The lack of scientific evidence for their arbitrary ranking system doesn’t stop EWG from giving top marks to products like (Jessica) Alba’s and other ‘natural’ sunscreens that can cost more than \$30 for just two ounces. In fact, EWG profits from its misguided recommendations. If you purchase one of EWG’s recommended sunscreens through the Amazon link on its website, Amazon sends a portion of the price you pay back to EWG.” ([dailycaller.com/2015/08/17/the-nontoxic-scram-scaramongering-for-fun-and-profit/](http://dailycaller.com/2015/08/17/the-nontoxic-scram-scaramongering-for-fun-and-profit/)).

I guess my take home lesson, aside from be prepared for ambush and find the nearest exit that may be behind you, is to take the high road but be firm when the know-it-alls try to big league you for their own gains. My neighbor and I had a good laugh over this one, but I am sure the next episode will find me scouring reputation sites for bad blood. Good thing I didn’t bring up politics... ■



—Neal Bhatia, MD, Chief Medical Editor