

Why the Havana Syndrome Happened

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International Journal of
Social Psychiatry
1–3

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DOI: 10.1177/00207640231212865

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In their review article, Bartholomew and Baloh (2023) conclude that the ‘Havana Syndrome’ is not the result of a secret direct energy beam weapon targeted on US embassy personnel by an unknown hostile entity. It is a psychogenic stress reaction to bad science, scandalous media, and government intrusion into science. It is a well sourced and clearly articulated argument. Unfortunately, similar arguments have been made before, beginning with thorough investigations by Cuban authorities and the FBI immediately after the first announcement in 2016 that US embassy personnel in Havana had suffered traumatic brain injury from a new type of sonic weapon. The thorough Cuban investigation was dismissed as not credible because of an apparent conflict of interest to cover up the scandal, but the FBI’s investigation also found the fear to be baseless. Many subsequent investigations reached the same conclusion (Fields, 2018a), yet the alarm persists nearly 7 years later. Why? If, as Bartholomew and Baloh conclude, there was no weapon and no brain injuries, how could such a catastrophic misdiagnosis occur? The deeper issues underlying the events must be addressed otherwise the saga will never end, and worse, it will be repeated in a different situation.

The reasons the Havana Syndrome persists today are the same reasons that spawned the episode in the first place – lost credibility in once trusted authorities and institutions. The critical question, then, is how could so many different trusted entities – journalism, scientific publication, medicine, and government, collapse in failure to perform their prime functions?

A loss of credibility in medical professionals and scientists is what launched the misdiagnosis and perpetuated it, but why? It has never been adequately explained why the US embassy in Havana sent their personnel with health concerns to an ear nose and throat doctor in private practice in Miami, who has a checkered past (Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, 2011), rather than availing itself of the renowned medical resources available to the federal government. That Maimi physician and his compatriots concluded that all the patients they examined with various health complaints were suffering from the same disorder. Moreover, that all the patients had experienced traumatic brain injury, not natural disease, from a clandestine sonic weapon, the likes of which the world has never seen. The public deserves an answer as to why the

health concerns were handled in this way, because with the clarity of hindsight, that was a very bad decision that triggered an avalanche of damage.

The Maimi doctor’s diagnosis was sustained by subsequent examinations by other doctors and scientists. Those trusted experts confirmed the frightening diagnosis of traumatic brain and or inner ear injury caused by a clandestine direct energy beam weapon of unknown type. But many other doctors and scientists found the medical and scientific data unsound. As evidence accumulated that discredited earlier conclusions, the causes and effects shifted continually. That is how the ‘sonic weapon’ attack morphed into the nebulous ‘syndrome’ from Havana. An endless stream of new theories and new diagnoses whipped up an incessant news storm that swept the globe for years. A credible medical or scientific authority that the public and government could trust was not to be found.

The reasons that doctors and scientists lacked sufficient credibility to calm the situation with accurate diagnoses and fact-based science must be confronted and corrected. Whether the motive was self-aggrandizement, financial conflict of interest, the result of incompetence, or something else, the terrifying misdiagnosis caused enormous harm to people who were told by trusted authorities that they had sustained brain injury from an enemy weapon.

Contributing to the confusion is the fact that many scientists, medical doctors and government officials who knew there was no weapon or brain injury were reluctant to become involved in the controversy. Professional and institutional reputations were at stake, and scientists and doctors were reluctant to speak out against their colleagues. Moreover, many medical professionals, university scientists, government scientists and officials, were (and are) prohibited from speaking to the press on this topic (and other topics deemed politically sensitive). Some scientists who were funded by the government to investigate the health concerns were required to sign

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non-disclosure agreements. Many were threatened with punishment, and some suffered reprisals for sharing their expert knowledge. The peer review process for obtaining grants and publishing in scientific journals makes it dangerous for scientists to make enemies of colleagues who are in positions of power. The majority of biomedical research in the US is supported by government grant funding, and that financial conflict of interest makes scientists reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them.

Once the Havana Syndrome reached the level of international scandal, many diplomats and embassy personnel remained silent for a more noble reason – to avoid further damage to the vital institution they were devoted to, so as not to undermine its critical mission in conducting US foreign policy.

With no clear credible authority to trust, the patients and public did not know who or what to believe. Some charged the government with incompetence in handling the affair and others suspected a cover-up. The situation left State Department officials with little choice but to take extreme measures to protect US personnel and shut down the embassy. Officials did so even as many in the Havana embassy and State Department knew from the outset that the FBI was correct in rejecting the matter.

Sensational coverage from all the major print and broadcast news sources is what fueled the firestorm of fear and world-wide alarm that continues to this day. Had journalism adhered to responsible reporting practices, the story would have never gained legs, let alone raced onto the world stage. The news would have quickly vanished like the periodic reports of a Loch Ness monster and UFOs that are spun from speculation. But the whodunnit intrigue was irresistible in boosting sales and driving mouse clicks for digital publication revenue.

Incompetent news reporting from organizations feeding on sensationalism over substance, and irresponsible, false reporting from outlets with a political agenda, come as news to no one. The culpability of a failed press in the Havana Syndrome has been amply covered elsewhere (Fields 2018b), so only brief acknowledgement is needed here. Amidst the dramatic loss of newspapers and news stations, and the growth of the internet giving voice to amateur sleuths and conspirators, it is important to recognize that there was also solid reporting of these events from many journalists; notably from science writers. They were drowned out by the flood of sensational news. Science news desks at major broadcast and print media stopped covering this story soon after it became obvious that the fear was not scientific nor credible, but other news editors at some of the same media organizations couldn't keep from feeding from the trough of sensational slop.

The more pertinent question for present purposes is the loss of credibility in scientific publication. The *JAMA* and other journal articles discussed in the review were so obviously flawed, they never would have passed peer review had it not been for tectonic changes in scientific

publication in recent times. The apologetic editorial accompanying the *JAMA* article and the many outraged letters to the editor demanding retraction substantiate the loss of rigor in scientific publication in favor of striving for popularity to promote marketing. 'At this point, a unifying explanation for the symptoms experienced by the US government officials described in this case series remains elusive and the effect of possible exposure to audible phenomena is unclear', the editors stated in their commentary accompanying the article and undermining its conclusion of concussion-like brain injury (Muth & Lewis, 2018). While scientists rightly point fingers at sensational news publications, there is equal need to understand the reasons for failed credibility in scientific publication.

Some incorrect studies will always be published in scientific journals, and eventually ferreted out by the scientific method, but the increasing loss of confidence in scientific publication stems from the new government mandate to make scientific articles freely available (open access). That replaced the time trusted financial model of scientific publication, which was funded by subscriptions. Scientists and intuitions paid to read publications that provided the most important and worthy findings. The pay-to-publish open-access model created an incentive for publishers to publish as much as possible with little regard for the formerly rigorous hurdles of publishing in a scientific journal. Like most scientists, I now receive several emails a day from such journals soliciting manuscript submissions from me for rapid publication (for a fee), often in fields that I have no expertise. The plethora of new open access digital journals has caused reviewer fatigue, making it difficult to obtain rigorous peer review from competent authorities. Most recently, scientists have turned to posting their results on preprint servers to avoid the problems of publishing in scientific journals.

Adding to this perfect storm of failures is a loss of confidence and credibility in government authorities, institutions, and scientists. The conclusions of the FBI, State Department, NIH, CDC, CIA, DoD, and politicians are not universally regarded as being accurate, reliable, and unbiased. As indicated in their review, the National Academy of Science was called upon as the final arbitrator to put the matter to bed, but it failed to achieve its aim.

Likewise, scientists, who were once relied upon for expert, unbiased analysis, are no longer respected as they once were. Some, like Dr. Anthony Fauci are vilified. Whether it is vaccination, global warming, or how to manage the COVID pandemic and treat the disease, scientists and government institutions are afforded little more than equal time to anyone else, including crackpots.

The authors in their review rightly highlight widespread ignorance about psychogenic illness, but the same criticism applies to all the other proposed clandestine energy beam weapon theories, which defy the laws of physics. This debacle highlights the importance of reliable sources of information and underscores the importance of

an educated public who appreciate science and the scientific approach to seeking truth. Xenophobia, fear of technology and political agendas all fueled the inferno of the Havana Syndrome, as the authors indicate, but has this tragic event changed any of those incendiary causes?

There are no mastermind villains responsible for the Havana Syndrome. This was a catastrophic failure of multiple entities. The federal government has offered financial compensation to the victims, as they should. It is the least that can be done to compensate for the serious damage the government's mishandling of the situation caused. Will scientific journals, news media, and institutions act to heal victims from the damage they have caused and restore public trust?

Have we learned from the tragic Havana Syndrome? Have appropriate measures been taken to prevent its repetition? Open access publication thrives as a lucrative business. Governments and Institutions have a legitimate need to release information that is vetted for accuracy and consistent with their missions, but that can result in only official policy becoming available to the public. There will always be some unscrupulous doctors and scientists who seek sensation or bilk the public for financial gain and notoriety. Fear of reprisals from colleagues, grant funding agencies and institutions that employ scientists and doctors is inevitable. Projecting current trendlines into the future does not provide much confidence that much has been learned from the Havana Syndrome.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The article supported by Intramural Research Program NICHD/NIH ZIA000713.

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