

Forum: Health & Youth Commission (HYC)

Issue: Combating the spread of medical misinformation and disinformation

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Introduction

The issue of medical misinformation and disinformation has become an international public health concern within all member states. While false medical claims have existed for centuries, dating back to the eras of Black Death or medieval medical practices, social media, digital platforms, and artificial intelligence have increased the speed and scale at which misinformation can spread. This became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, when false claims about vaccines, treatments, and prevention reached audiences across national borders. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has described this situation as an “infodemic,” where excessive information, which includes false or misleading information, makes reliable health guidance harder to justify or persuade the general public. This report will examine the issue’s development, international responses, major actors, and possible solutions when combating rampant medical misinformation and disinformation internationally.

Definition of Key Terms

Medical misinformation

Medical misinformation refers to inaccurate or misleading health information that is shared without the intention to deceive others but can still, however, create an impact. It can result from misunderstandings, outdated information, or incorrect interpretation of scientific research.

Medical disinformation

Medical disinformation refers to the false or misleading information that is deliberately created by third-party sources to spread with the intent of deceiving people. Unlike misinformation, disinformation involves a deliberate attempt to mislead others or an audience and may be used for purposes spanning from political to financial.

Infodemic

Infodemic is explained as an overabundance of information created, including false or misleading information, which makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources or reliable health guidance since versions of solutions or “research” were published. The World Health Organisation (WHO) used this term extensively during the COVID-19 pandemic since an infodemic occurred with the spread of misleading information that has led others to take

actions that are not encouraged by recognised bodies such as the WHO.

Health Literacy

Health literacy refers to the ability of individuals to access, understand, evaluate, and use health information and services to make appropriate decisions about their own health conditions or the situation around them. Improving health literacy is just as important as subjects such as improving financial literacy since it can help individuals recognize unreliable medical claims and make informed health decisions that are not swayed by disinformation or misinformation.

Background Information

Development of medical misinformation

Medical misinformation has been a global issue long before the use of the internet, with false claims about diseases and treatments that spread through word of mouth, newspapers, yellow journalism, and other forms of communication. However, digital technology has fundamentally changed the scale of medical misinformation and disinformation. Social media and online platforms consist of people who claim to have studied medicinal practices and share health information without requiring scientific evidence or professional expertise. During health emergencies, this can create information gaps that are quickly filled by rumours and misleading claims of treatments. This creates a dilemma during health emergencies where people refer to the internet for treatment and are often misled. As a result, medical misinformation can affect individuals' health decisions domestically while also creating wider public health challenges when misleading claims cross national borders.

The use of digital communication has effectively and rapidly accelerated the process of its spread. Algorithms that prioritise engaging content can also attract strong reactions from individuals with poor health literacy. Rather than increasing the amount of false information available, digital misinformation has made medical misinformation harder for authorities to identify and control. Consequently, the issue has developed beyond the existence of false medical information and has become an international challenge requiring cooperation between governments, health organisations, digital platforms, and other relevant stakeholders domestically or internationally.

The COVID-19 infodemic and historical roots

The COVID-19 pandemic has left the world in shambles since 2019. It highlighted how the shifting digital media landscape affects public health and influences government responses. As the virus spread globally in 2020, people faced uncertainty about the causes, symptoms, and treatments of the virus. False and misleading claims spread alongside legitimate scientific information, making it difficult for people to distinguish between the

opposing information. WHO describes an infodemic as an overabundance of information, which includes false or misleading information that can create confusion, encourage risky behaviour, and undermine the trust of the public in online platforms, which is the fastest and most convenient way for people to gain information.

Consequences are not limited to confusion, since the WHO reported that during the first three months of 2020, nearly 6000 people were hospitalised and at least 800 people may have died as a result of misinformation. Based on the research available at that time, conclusions weren't tested or peer-reviewed but were published online, which sparked attention. These effects demonstrated why medical misinformation and disinformation needed to be treated as a top priority internationally. Historical analysis suggests that while misinformation was not the biological cause of death during the Black Death, widespread medical misconceptions and rumours severely crippled public health containment efforts. Since 14th-century societies lacked modern scientific knowledge, the reliance on flawed medical theories, ineffective treatments, and social scapegoating actively prevented communities from adopting effective containment measures, thereby exacerbating the pandemic's toll. When individuals act on false claims, misinformation can fully influence their actions and beliefs about medical practice and may often lead to irreversible consequences.

International response

The scale of the COVID-19 infodemic has led to an international response between organisations with more systematic approaches to the problem. As of April 2020, WHO held a technical consultation involving experts from different fields to identify ways to mitigate the spread of misinformation. This helped establish "infodemic management" as a public health practice alongside plans to develop health literacy. WHO's approach focuses on understanding people's concerns about medical information through communicating scientific information clearly, building resistance to misinformation, and involving communities in health response to build trust.

After pandemics, these approaches have continued to develop. In 2023, WHO reported that more than 1300 trained infodemic managers from over 142 countries had developed skills in monitoring health information environments. The majority of WHO member states also reported tracking health misinformation and combating it. These developments show that international organisations are increasingly viewing misinformation as a part of health emergencies rather than a problem that occurred during COVID-19.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

World Health Organisation (WHO)

WHO is the main international organisation tasked with addressing medical misinformation and disinformation, handling topics spanning from pandemics to diseases. It provides global health guidance, coordinates international humanitarian/ health response, and works to improve access to reliable medical information when it comes to periods of infodemic or medical disinformation. The WHO is central to this issue since its warnings or actions should be given top priority attention because medical misinformation can directly interfere with international responses to health emergencies.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)

UNESCO is involved in combating misinformation through media and information literacy across different member states. Its focus on helping people evaluate information, especially elders, recognize unreliable sources, and understand how information spreads through digital platforms all contribute to combating misinformation or disinformation. UNESCO is relevant since it improves people's ability to assess information and improve health literacy, especially online, with the rapid development of social media, rather than treating misinformation only as a public health issue for others.

United States of America

The United States is an important actor because of its large technology sector and its influence over global digital communication. Major social media and technology companies based in the United States operate platforms used by people worldwide. These include social media and other news outlets that are considered reliable sources of medical information. The country also has a major role in international health research and vaccine development. Its policies toward online platforms, such as its goal of strictly restricting medical disinformation and scientific institutions, can therefore have effects beyond its borders.

China

China is significant in this issue because of its large population, major digital platforms, and role in international health policy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, information about the origins, spread, and prevention of the virus became the top national priority. China also operates a large domestic digital information environment with its own platforms and a strict set of regulations that go through the state. Its approach to controlling online information provides an important perspective when discussing the balance between combating harmful misinformation and maintaining clear access to reliable information.

Possible Solutions

Strengthening Health and Media Literacy

Governments and international organisations could combat this issue through many viewpoints, but one method is expanding health and media literacy programmes to help individuals. By expanding media or medical literacy, it helps people determine whether information is trustworthy before sharing. WHO and UNESCO could support these efforts by developing multilingual educational materials that countries can adapt to their own education systems. Programmes should also target older adults and communities with limited access to reliable healthcare information rather than focusing on the younger generations.

Increasing Platform Responsibility

Governments and international organisations could establish policies directed towards platforms. Social media and technology companies could take greater responsibility for the spread of harmful medical misinformation on their platforms. Companies could work with recognised health authorities to identify false medical claims and provide users with links to reliable sources. With the help of technology or trained experts, companies could be able to review medical information posted online to eliminate misinformation. Any content moderation system should include clear standards and appeal processes so that legitimate scientific discussion, disagreement, or criticism is not unnecessarily removed, silencing users.

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