

Medical Misinformation: A Call for Ethical Responsibility Among Doctors in the COVID Era



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In the battle against COVID-19, misinformation has emerged as a formidable adversary, threatening public health efforts and sowing seeds of confusion and mistrust. While misinformation can originate from various sources, including social media, news outlets, and conspiracy theorists, one particularly concerning trend is the propagation of false information by individuals whom society inherently trusts: doctors. What comes closer to home is when this is done by physicians in public health service or in academia.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the vital role that healthcare professionals play in disseminating accurate information and guiding public health policies. As a profession, medical providers take the Hippocratic oath in which they agree to “First, do no harm” in providing their medical care. In addition, more modern translations have added the following sentences: “I will respect the hard-won scientific gains of those physicians in whose steps I walk, and gladly share such knowledge as is mine with those who are to follow....I will prevent disease whenever I can, for prevention is preferable to cure”.¹ However, alongside the tireless efforts of many healthcare professionals, there have been instances where a minority of doctors have contributed to the spread of misinformation, whether through misinterpretation of data, promotion of unproven treatments, or propagation of conspiracy theories. One of the most damaging consequences of medical misinformation by doctors is the erosion of public trust in science and evidence-based medicine. When individuals hear conflicting messages from healthcare professionals, it undermines their confidence in the medical community as a whole. This skepticism can lead to vaccine hesitancy, reluctance to adhere to public health guidelines, and, ultimately, an unnecessary increase in the spread of COVID-19 and its associated morbidity and mortality.

Furthermore, medical misinformation perpetuated by doctors can have dire consequences for individual patients.

Patients may make decisions about their health based on false information, leading to delayed or inappropriate treatments, exacerbation of symptoms, and, in some cases, avoidable harm or death. In the context of COVID-19, misinformation about treatments or preventive measures can be particularly dangerous, as it may deter individuals from seeking necessary medical care or taking essential precautions to protect themselves and others from the virus. Misinformation’s deleterious effects are even more amplified in chronically under-resourced and marginalized communities of color that have seen disproportionate COVID-19 deaths that will have generational impacts for the survivors and their families. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the US population experienced the most significant 2-year decline in life expectancy in roughly a century, disproportionately impacting people of color and exacerbating longstanding racial disparities in life expectancy. While overall US life expectancy declined by 2.7 years between 2019 and 2021, American Indian and Alaskan Native (AIAN) people experienced a decline of 6.6 years, and Hispanic people and Black people dropped 4.2 and 4 years, respectively, compared to a decline of 2.4 years for White people and 2.1 years for Asian people.^{2,3} Those under the age of 65 without health insurance, Republicans, and those living in rural areas continue to report lower COVID-19 vaccine uptake than their counterparts.⁴ A recent poll by the Kaiser Family Foundation Health Misinformation Tracking Poll Pilot found that some groups seem to be more susceptible to misinformation than others, with larger shares of Black and Hispanic adults, those with lower levels of educational attainment, and those who identify politically as Republicans or lean that way saying many of the misinformation items examined in the poll are “probably true” or “definitely true”.⁵

It is imperative that healthcare professionals and the organizations that they represent uphold the highest standards of ethical conduct and adhere to the principles of evidence-based medicine, especially during public health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Adherence to these principles needs to transcend political and religious affiliations. This requires a commitment to honesty, integrity, and accountability in all aspects of patient care and public communication. In this issue of JGIM, Haller et al. courageously do just that in the face of a lackluster (or no) response from their home institution.⁶

Healthcare providers have tremendous respect from their patients and families. More than eight in ten adults (82%) say they trust their own doctor or health care provider at least a fair amount when it comes to providing reliable information about vaccines.⁷ To combat medical misinformation, doctors must prioritize continuing education and critical appraisal of scientific evidence. They should stay informed about the latest developments in COVID-19 research and rely on reputable sources of information, such as peer-reviewed journals and public health agencies, when forming their opinions and recommendations. Additionally, medical and public health schools, healthcare institutions, and medical professional organizations have a responsibility to provide guidance and support to their members, promoting adherence to ethical standards and the dissemination of accurate information.

Beyond individual actions, addressing medical misinformation requires a multifaceted approach involving collaboration between healthcare professionals, policymakers, educators, and the media. Efforts to counter misinformation must include timely, proactive, culturally, and linguistically tailored multimedia communication strategies, public education campaigns, and policies aimed at regulating the dissemination of false information.

The spread of medical misinformation by doctors poses a significant threat to public health and undermines the trust and credibility of the medical profession. As trusted guardians of health, doctors must recognize their responsibility to uphold the highest standards of integrity and professionalism, particularly during a global health crisis. By embracing evidence-based practice and committing to ethical conduct, healthcare professionals and their academic institutions must play a pivotal role in combating misinformation and safeguarding the health and well-being of individuals and communities worldwide.

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Declarations

Conflict of Interest All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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