

Surgeon general: How doctors can fight COVID-19 misinformation

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Health misinformation isn't just some quirk of the Twitterverse. It has invaded search engines, retail websites and even mainstream media, and it is now crowding out some of the most vital public efforts to prevent illness and promote well-being. It demands the American people's immediate awareness.

This is why the U.S. surgeon general, Vice Admiral Vivek Murthy, MD, has issued an advisory on how health care organizations, technology companies and others can come together to build a healthy information environment.

"Health misinformation is a serious threat to public health," he wrote. "It can cause confusion, sow mistrust, harm people's health and undermine public health efforts. Limiting the spread of health misinformation is a moral and civic imperative that will require a whole-of-society effort."

The AMA recently adopted policy to encourage social media companies and organizations to crack down on medical misinformation by:

- Further strengthening their content-moderation policies related to medical and public health misinformation, including enhanced content monitoring, augmentation of recommendation engines focused on false information, and stronger integration of verified health information.
- Recognizing the spread of medical and public health misinformation over dissemination networks and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to address this problem as appropriate.
- Supporting the dissemination of accurate medical and public health information by public health organizations and health-policy experts.
- Working with public health agencies in an effort to establish relationships with journalists and news agencies to enhance the public reach in disseminating accurate medical and public health information.

Physicians are facing a barrage of patient questions about the COVID-19 vaccine based on extensive rumors, misinformation and disinformation circulating amongst the American public. Panelists during an episode of the AMA’s “COVID-19: What Physicians Need to Know” webinar series debunked existing myths and addressed attendees’ questions.

In the latest webinar, experts discuss vaccine misinformation.

More is less

The surgeon general noted that people have struggled during the pandemic to deal with the volume of information coming at them about COVID-19—in the form of news, public health guidance, fact sheets, infographics, research, opinions, rumors and myths—a situation the World Health Organization and the United Nations have described as an “infodemic.”

“Amid all this information, many people have also been exposed to health misinformation: information that is false, inaccurate or misleading according to the best available evidence at the time,” he wrote, adding that this has caused confusion and led some people to reject vital public health measures, such as masking, physical distancing and COVID-19 vaccination, and even to use unproven treatments.

Visit the AMA COVID-19 resource center for clinical information, guides and resources, and updates on advocacy and medical ethics.

Get the latest news on the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines, variants and more reliable information directly from experts and physician leaders with the “AMA COVID-19 Update.”

You can catch every episode by subscribing to the AMA’s YouTube channel or the audio-only podcast version.

3 key approaches

“The only way to address health misinformation is to recognize that all of us, in every sector of society, have a responsibility to act,” the surgeon general wrote, noting what health professionals and health organizations specifically can do.

Be proactive with patients and the public. This includes taking time to understand each patient’s knowledge, beliefs and values. “Listen with empathy, and when possible, correct misinformation in personalized ways,” the surgeon general wrote. “When addressing health concerns, consider using

less technical language that is accessible to all patients. Find opportunities to promote patient health literacy on a regular basis.”

Reclaim technology and media platforms. “For example, professional associations can equip their members to serve as subject-matter experts for journalists and effectively communicate peer-reviewed research and expert opinions online,” he noted.

Get out into the community. Health systems should look to community members for help in developing localized public health messages. In addition, associations and other health organizations “should offer trainings for clinicians on how to address misinformation in ways that account for patients’ diverse needs, concerns, backgrounds and experiences,” the surgeon general wrote.

The surgeon general’s advisory also lays out specific steps that technology companies, journalists and media organizations, researchers and research institutions, funders and government agencies each can take.

“Every single person can do their part to confront misinformation,” the surgeon general wrote. “But it’s not just an individual responsibility. We need institutions to recognize that this issue is their moral and civic responsibility, too, and that they are accountable.”