

# Defeating misinformation is key in ending the pandemic

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As we confront yet another major surge in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations across the country, we are once more fighting a two-pronged war: against the virus and against rampant misinformation.

The evidence around vaccination is abundantly clear. Vaccines are by far the best way for your patients to protect themselves and their loved ones from severe complications of COVID-19. But you wouldn't know it if you were a regular viewer of some popular TV networks, or received your news from agenda-driven websites that traffic in half-truths and outright lies about the virus.

Whatever their reasons, the result of this misinformation crusade is doubt, confusion and division at a time when our public response to this pandemic must be unified and resolute. This sobering reality has been made clear by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Roughly 99% of deaths linked to COVID-19 in this wave—and the vast majority of those with severe symptoms that require hospitalization—have come among patients who were not fully vaccinated.

The Food and Drug Administration's recent approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against COVID-19 is not only a landmark event in science and medicine; it is an opportunity to set the record straight. Vaccines for COVID-19 are safe. They are effective. And they are our best chance to bring this pandemic to an end.

But vaccines alone won't save us. Now, more than ever before, the public needs honest and clear communication about the importance of vaccines, vaccine science, and the crucial role they have in protecting public health.

## Obligations of responsible media

Entities of public trust in society play an important role as credible sources for information at all times, but particularly during a public health crisis. Given their reach and influence, news organizations carry

tremendous responsibility. They must help viewers and readers separate the facts from fiction, and proven treatments from potentially dangerous poisons.

As physicians, and in an effort to ease the tremendous pressure on our nation's health system, the AMA urges the cooperation of media outlets—TV, print and online—to tell the truth about the safety and efficacy of these COVID-19 vaccines, the rigorous research and review process behind them, and to be voices for science and evidence for their audiences.

Reporting on unproven and potentially dangerous treatments for this virus, including ivermectin, hydroxychloroquine and other treatments that have not been scientifically validated, confuses the public and puts lives at even greater risk.

As fall proceeds, the ongoing tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic in our country is only intensified by the fact that science has given us the means to bring this dark chapter to a close. Vaccination is our only way out this pandemic—but that exit will remain blocked until the vast majority of those who are eligible to receive the vaccination do so.

It is clear that some media outlets and personalities continue to foster hesitancy and resistance to COVID-19 vaccinations by framing the issue solely in terms of infringement upon civil liberties or personal freedom, and those voices that are then amplified through social media and other online channels.

## **Role in shaping behavior**

The influence of news organizations should not be understated. Late this summer, the polling firm Morning Consult found that vaccine reluctance among adults who watch Fox News dropped to an all-time low of 27% after hosts such as Sean Hannity voiced support for vaccination. That was an improvement from just a few months earlier, when that figure stood at almost 40%.

This is good news, and a great sign that some who are not yet vaccinated remain open-minded. We strongly encourage those who are unvaccinated to discuss their questions or concerns with a physician or health professional so they can make informed choices about their health and their individual risk.

The longer this pandemic rages, the more people will die or suffer needlessly from what is now a highly preventable illness. The AMA has great respect for the civil liberties upon which our nation was founded, but as physicians and scientists we also recognize that freedom must be carefully balance with a moral and ethical obligation to our fellow citizens. That is the only way we can serve humanity and advance the common good.