

Stopping misinformation, restoring trust are steps on same journey

FEB 25, 2022

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Immediate Past President

Overt politicization of the pandemic—and the speed with which falsehoods about all aspects of COVID-19 have spread online, over the airwaves and through media—are major reasons why the U.S. has suffered a far greater COVID-related death toll than other large, well-resourced nations.

The recent controversies about misinformation widely circulating on popular streaming services and social media have renewed calls for greater oversight and enforcement of these media channels. But how can we accomplish that without infringing on our right to free speech?

As physicians, we too often bear the brunt of such efforts to mislead and confuse the public, and must speak out against purveyors of junk science and conspiracy theories. We must work to address the pandemic that long preceded COVID-19: a pandemic of mistrust. You can find a thorough discussion of these twin pandemics, and the five steps we must undertake now in response to them, in my remarks to the National Press Club this week.

Ensuring greater accountability

We need greater responsibility on the part of the corporations who run these platforms to recognize and limit the spread of disinformation and other falsehoods related to COVID-19, vaccination or related subjects, and help their viewers and listeners distinguish fact from fiction. We need a firm commitment by members of Congress and other elected officials to ensure that those who spread lies and disinformation are held accountable for their actions.

History will judge us harshly if we fail to change the course we have taken to date, which has brought us so much division, disinformation and death—unnecessary death in so many cases. With safe and effective vaccines widely available, and a base of knowledge

about this virus that continues to expand, the fact that some 1,500 Americans are still losing their lives to COVID-19 every day is inconceivable at this stage in the pandemic.

The unchecked spread of unintentional misinformation and purposeful disinformation across various platforms has sowed confusion and mistrust while heightening vaccine hesitancy and refusal. This in turn has triggered violence against physicians, nurses and other health professionals, along with a host of other negative consequences.

Consequences of lost trust

One of the most dangerous and deeply troubling of those consequences has been the widespread loss of trust in science, in organized medicine, in units of government, and in the public health institutions that we depend on for the credible, unbiased, evidence-based information we need to make sound decisions about our own health and the well-being of those we care for.

Some of the damage has been self-inflicted. Early in the pandemic, mixed messaging about masking from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was a misstep that weakened the agency's ability to render what proved to be sound guidance about the vital importance of masking up. In other cases, the damage has been inflicted upon us through disinformation campaigns directed by both foreign governments and domestic extremist groups, as documented by the Department of Homeland Security.

At the same time, we cannot overlook the fact that a small number of licensed physicians continue to foster belief in scientifically unvalidated and potentially dangerous "cures" for COVID-19, which has increased vaccine hesitancy and fueled further politicization of the pandemic. Their actions violate the ethics of our profession and jeopardize the trust found at the center of the patient-physician relationship. Our AMA continues to urge state medical boards to respond swiftly and decisively when physicians spread falsehoods.

Trust must be earned

Of course, the CDC, Food and Drug Administration and other agencies at the federal, state and local levels must do their part to earn and keep our trust, just as physicians and other health professionals must do. Among other steps, this will require a higher level of cooperation among these institutions, a renewed emphasis on consistent and scientifically sound public health messaging, and a greater level of transparency that demonstrates a complete lack of outside interference in formulating and issuing the guidance that helps save lives.



With the Omicron peak behind us, we all anxiously await the chance to embrace some semblance of the lives we led before the pandemic struck. Ending the pandemic of mistrust that has grown in tandem with COVID-19 is an equally important goal that is also within our reach.