

AMA details plan to stop the public health “infodemic”

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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, disinformation has been of the utmost concern. This has led to what some describe as a secondary “infodemic,” where permanent harm may be done to the trust in institutions due to the sheer volume of disinformation spread in a rapidly changing and sensitive environment, says an AMA Board of Trustees report adopted at the 2022 AMA Annual Meeting in Chicago.

“The public health emergency was undoubtedly worsened and prolonged due to disinformation campaigns sowing distrust in vaccines, pharmaceutical interventions and public health mitigation measures,” says the report. “Health professionals spreading disinformation lends credibility to specious claims.”

“Physicians are a trusted source of information for patients and the public alike, but the spread of disinformation by a few has implications for the entire profession and causes harm. Physicians have an ethical and professional responsibility to share truthful information, correct misleading and inaccurate information, and direct people to reliable sources of health information,” said AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD. “The AMA is committed to confronting disinformation, and we need to address the root of the problem.

“We must ensure that health professionals spreading disinformation aren’t able to use far-reaching platforms, often benefitting them financially, to disseminate dangerous health claims,” Dr. Harmon added. “While we are unlikely to undo the harms caused by disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can act now to help prevent the spread of disinformation in the future.”

The AMA House of Delegates adopted policy to “implement a comprehensive strategy to address health-related disinformation disseminated by health professionals.”

That strategy will include:

- Maintaining the AMA as a trusted source of evidence-based information for physicians and patients.
- Ensuring that evidence-based medical and public health information is accessible by engaging with publishers, research institutions and media organizations to develop best practices around paywalls and preprints to improve access to evidence-based information and analysis.
- Addressing disinformation disseminated by health professionals via social media platforms and addressing the monetization of spreading disinformation on social media platforms.
- Educating health professionals and the public on how to recognize disinformation as well as how it spreads.
- Considering the role of health-professional societies in serving as appropriate fact-checking entities for health-related information disseminated by various media platforms.
- Encouraging continuing education to be available for health professionals who serve as fact-checker to help prevent the dissemination of health-related information.
- Ensuring that licensing boards have the authority to take disciplinary action against health professionals for spreading health-related disinformation and affirms that all speech in which a health professional is using their credentials is professional conduct and can be scrutinized by their licensing entity.
- Ensuring specialty boards have the authority to take action against board certification for health professionals spreading health-related disinformation.
- Encouraging state and local medical societies to engage in dispelling disinformation in their jurisdictions.

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