

Letter to the Editor

Impact of information epidemic in the COVID-19 pandemic

Sir,

With the global escalation of COVID-19 cases, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on March 11th, 2020.¹ Given the novelty of the disease and a lack of reliable information regarding its transmission, preventive measures, and treatment, there has been a significant increase in cases and deaths during the initial and subsequent waves of COVID-19.^{2,3} Additionally, during epidemics, deliberate attempts were made to disseminate fake news and misinformation, undermining public health responses and jeopardizing hard-earned health achievements. These further compromises nations' abilities to effectively mitigate the impact of epidemics. The rapid and extensive dissemination of information without careful verification can present dangerous risks for the general populace.⁴ This overabundance of information, accurate or inaccurate, corroborated, or uncorroborated during an epidemic juncture had been termed an Infodemic or information epidemic.

Managing the COVID-19-related information epidemic, promoting healthy behaviors, and mitigating harm from misinformation and disinformation have been very crucial. At the Munich Conference in the year 2020, the WHO chief remarked "We are not only fighting a pandemic; we are also fighting an Infodemic, which has emphasized the risk of bogus information during this epidemic".⁵ Nowadays, people express their views, ideas, opinions, and beliefs directly on social media networks and even try to seek information and news on such networks themselves. A Lancet study has reported that nowadays more people use social media as a first-hand source of information, and networks viz. WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter now called X, have become primarily easily accessible platforms for the masses across the world.⁶ These platforms have served as an effective means of disseminating knowledge and information during the pandemic as well as connecting people with their families and friends.

Today, social media boasts billions of users globally, enabling the rapid dissemination of information whether accurate or erroneous, beneficial or harmful to any corner of the world with just a click, often within seconds.⁷ People living in, the so-called, 'information bubble' are more vulnerable to catching attention to low-quality information leaving them in the lurch, whom to rely on or not. Even at the pinnacle of the pandemic, various governments have been battling with people using half-

baked health information related to COVID-19 through these readily accessible platforms.^{8,9} Even people were reluctant to follow COVID-19 preventive and treatment guidelines appropriately due to the spread of misleading information through these social media platforms. Thus, this exuberant rise of the modern digitized information economy has led to a mounting need to fight against this emerging global information and communication cataclysm.

In this evolving landscape, the dissemination of health information has become a pressing public health issue. Unfortunately, misinformation and disinformation about health readily proliferate, particularly through social media platforms. Healthcare providers possess commendable levels of health literacy and hold a position of trust among patients as reliable sources of authentic health information.¹⁰ Therefore, leveraging digital technologies can foster collaboration between healthcare providers and media outlets, enhancing health literacy and addressing any potential confusion. These platforms offer opportunities to address public inquiries and concerns among healthcare providers and various stakeholders.¹¹

As lacunae related to health literacy increase the probability of stigma, myths, and misconceptions, emphasis should be laid on providing valid and accurate information in local, cultural, and easily understandable specific mediums of communication.¹² Another major aspect to mitigate such an emerging Infodemic snarl is instilling a comprehensive health education program.¹³ It is a well-known fact that the health literacy level in any society evolves with the basic understanding of different health aspects, which in turn makes us responsible individuals to lead an optimally healthy life. So, by providing psychological support, counseling, and education through social media networks or artificial intelligence, nations can mobilize the vulnerable and socially disadvantaged population and nurture their knowledge and awareness to lead healthy lives. Initiatives aimed at reducing stigma, such as positive messaging campaigns, informational materials, and visual and auditory resources, are crucial for alleviating panic and enhancing individuals' capacity to cope with and bounce back from stressful situations. Further, policy monitoring, fact-checking, implementation, and impact assessment are of paramount importance.

Henceforth, combating such future Infodemic snarls requires collaborative endeavors to distribute genuine, timely, precise, tailored, and beneficial information that

are essential for fostering community awareness, facilitating treatment collaboration, and advancing research initiatives.

Raman Sharma¹, Mahendra Kumar^{2*}, Arti Saini³

¹Department of Hospital Admin. PGIMER, Chandigarh, India

²Department of Neurology, PGIMER, Chandigarh, India

³Department of Paediatrics, PGIMER, Chandigarh, India

***Correspondence to**

Dr. Mahendra Kumar

E-mail: kumarmahen9@gmail.com

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