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## Misinformation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 is considered one of the worst global crises of the past. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, a lack of certainty dominated, an “uncertainty vacuum”, relating to knowledge and empirical evidence, with conflicting evidence and a high level of emergency. During the COVID-19 outbreak, communication with the public was somewhat poor. The inherent scientific uncertainty of a real-time pandemic involves different and ambiguous messages about how contagious and deadly is the disease compared to influenza, resulting in a widespread public confusion. Health misinformation, unsubstantiated opinions about health, has the potential to cause many harmful effects to the public’s health with many consequences to global public health.

Because the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is new and new information is continually added about the understanding of the virus, there is some confusion in the general public. Misinformation can also be shared by various scientific sources, and health services sometimes, particularly when faced with new diseases and epidemics. Social media platforms have the possibility of access and sharing health information and misinformation. Because more and more people are now online, the dynamics of the medical misleading information involves potential health risks and considerable implications. The misinformation propagation on digital platforms through the Internet follows the spreading of the coronavirus.

Misinformation on prevention leads to some negative behaviors regarding health, not following the recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) or other scientific and trusted sources. The

misinformation tends to spread within networks, other digital platforms with manipulated information on social media. Erroneous medications and treatments falsely claiming to treat or prevent COVID-19, spread through Internet. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has given public health alerts, recommendations and other safety information about products.

Also, as treatments are studied and tested through clinical trials, the misinformation about different possible effective treatments under evaluation is spreading without the final safe results [1].

Generally every important news event like COVID-19 pandemic is accompanied with false rumours and fake news. Home isolation, social distancing and quarantine push people to seek information for the new evolving disease through the internet, like websites, social media, twitter etc.

As COVID-19 strikes today, challenge us in new ways and causes some times radical shifts. People often embrace simplistic conceptions and explanations adapted well with their ideas and level of education.

The term *infodemic*, a blend of information and epidemic, was introduced by the World Health Organization to refer to often extensive inaccurate information about the COVID-19 pandemic. A rapid and wide spread of both authentic and inaccurate information about the disease and as it happens, rumors, and fears diffuse, so it is difficult to perceive accurate information about COVID-19.

Many unauthorized websites sell falsified medicines to the public for therapies or prevention of COVID-19, exploiting the fears during the pandemic. Such products may be harmful and can lead to health problems. People must trust only public health sources.

It is not easy to stop people from spreading false-founded information. There is a need for actions-interventions by the governments and health organizations to curb or stop infodemic which is dangerous as the virus because of the negative effects. Asian countries investigate for offences and court prosecutions related to the COVID-19 infodemic. False news generally travels faster than true news on popular internet platforms [2].

### **Misinformation Versus Disinformation**

During pandemic people have experienced a lot of erroneous or inaccurate (*misinformation*) or some times intentionally misleading, deceptive (*disinformation*) related to all aspects of the 2020 health crisis on the new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes, COVID-19 (origin, consequences, treatment). Generally people who discern misleading information about COVID-19 on digital platforms, perform very often checks and seek information and advices from official and credible sources. On the contrary the disinformation removes people from searching additional information, avoiding news on the new coronavirus and COVID-19 and many people have decreased compliance with official guidelines and public-health measures (i.e., social distancing, washing hands frequently) [3]. Thus people rely strongly on the news media for information about novel developments, on social media platforms and messaging applications. The positive or negative impact of a specific information plays an essential role during a pandemic because determines behaviors associated with the spread of the virus. Inaccurate information can disorient individuals resulting

in not being able to protect themselves, which, in turn, can enforce the pandemic. Misconceptions about the virus spreading and prevention expose people to dangers relating to self protection not taking the necessary precautions - e.g., wearing a mask, hygienic measures. Critical thinking, responsibility and vigilance are very important for mitigation of the abundant misinformation.

Media trust is very important because it has to do with good compliance with pandemic-containment measures. During pandemic, misleading information, conspiracy theories and inadequate understanding of the situation make people unable to have a meaningful role in order to reduce the spread of the virus. Remaining critical is very important given the fact that there is a plethora of information derived from many ambiguous and inconsistent sources. People must check the validity of the information and trust credible resources on the disease. Actions must be taken against the false information. Everyone must analyze and interpret data and information and not adhere to oversimplified explanations on the new coronavirus and the disease that causes. Because everyone is spending more time online than ever before, false and fake information circulate rapidly. It is imperative that people to be responsible and cautious to stop the spread of misleading information which results in repulsing the threatening disease. The existing confusion for the new disease, leading to misinformation, determines different behaviors versus the disease condition. In general people have a tendency to obey to imposed strategies and actions by health authorities in response to pandemic.

On the contrary people with disinformation perceptions are less likely to comply and it is more possible to avoid information. The implications are very important. Misleading information sometimes results in denial of the seriousness of the disease condition but more often people have positive attitude to disease control and mitigation effects.

The intentionally misleading, deceptive information has implications to public health because disorients people from official guidelines and may hinder the battle against the illness [3].

### **Trust and Compliance**

Addressing the big issue of misinformation, there is a need of educational, and computational approaches-interventions to weaken the spread. For instance, Google, Facebook, are intervening to repel misinformation. Another approach to combat misinformation is the education of the public by providing information to people. People must rely on official health organizations for reliable information about COVID-19 like WHO. The WHO online information platform provides valuable advice for the public, the latest updates for COVID response and guidance [1].

Efforts are needed to the direction of good and reliable information, convincing people to trust the reliable sources and educating them with critical thinking of media avoiding misinformation. It is important that public-health services inspire confidence, offering continually advice with the increasing knowledge gained for COVID-19. Everyone must remain critical on the existing and circulating information through digital platforms. It is necessary to discern the credible information from the misleading and harmful information about the disease.

It is also important to help the public's understanding of the potential adverse health effects of mis- and disinformation. Educational materials and resources are very important. Digital literacy should be stimulated for the public in order to guide them on how to search, assess, verify information from official and trusted sources before adopting suggestions from social media and other platforms [4]. People must distinguish misinformation from intentionally deceptive disinformation. The role of official health sources, governmental services, the WHO, and journalists in general, is very important because they must enhance the public's trust to reliable and honest information especially in the initial phase of a crisis outbreak. The strategies and the design of public service announcements for making the distinction between mis- and disinformation to the general public is very important.

Because COVID-19 is a novel disease, there is a lack of true knowledge. So it is crucial to recognize mis- (and disinformation), restoring and maintaining trust from recommended sources of verified expert knowledge. During pandemic a lot of fake cures, unfounded theories and in general misleading information circulate through online platforms, building a chaotic information system. Thus global health authorities must play a significant role, intensifying the fight against the growing bad, misleading information that may worsen the pandemic.

Finally, the acute response to misinformation is the ability and responsibility of everyone to receive true information from credible sources about the coronavirus. During the uncertainty and fear related to the pandemic, the quality of information is really so valuable and vital aiding people to make wise decisions to protect their health and prevent the spread of the deadly virus.

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