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National Minority Health Month WEEKLY OPED BY SEP HS INTERNS

THE EFFECT OF MEDICAL MISINFORMATION IN MEDIA ON SOCIAL INEQUITY
BY KALLY CHAMBERLAIN AND SARAH HANAFY

The Virtual Explorers Internship at Fred Hutch is made possible by Pathways to Cancer Research (R25CA221770), a Youth Enjoy Science Award (YES/CURE), from the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at the National Institutes of Health. The contents of are solely the responsibility of the author(s) and the Fred Hutch Science Education Partnership and do not necessarily represent the official views of the NCI or NIH.

Many people depend on social media as their primary source of information, making them more susceptible to misinformation and disinformation. It becomes especially dangerous as medical disinformation develops, is shared, and mutates across the internet and communities. As the use of social media increases, the need for more accessible and credible information outlets is made even more apparent. And this can be done through education, with training regarding critical reading being taught in schools, and increasing relationships with health providers.

Drugs are romanticized in the media on a daily basis. Take the drink “lean” as an example. “Lean” is an illicit substance made using soda, hard candy, and Codeine cough syrup. On social media platforms, like TikTok, “lean” has been turned into a viral trend where people try to make it at home and call any purple item “lean.” TikTok’s primary audience is people in Generation Z (ages 9-24), making up 60% of the users. With only the knowledge of knowing the drink is purple and a drug, the underage audience started participating and attempting to make the drink. “Lean” can lead to altered states of consciousness, depression, and in the long term can even lead to organ damage and changes in the body’s ability to produce hormones. Not fully understanding the harm behind it, this trend went viral, especially among the younger audience.

This is just one of the many examples of substance abuse being recommended to younger audiences through social media. Social media influencers and celebrities constantly post videos or pictures of them using addictive substances publicly for their fans to see, making substance use seem more common and normal. The audiences of these influencers only see what the public figure wants them to see and rarely see the negative side effects associated with their behavior. Substance abuse creates an unpleasant reality that people wouldn’t want to see and paint a picture on social media that makes substance use desirable. For example, they promote the use of alcohol, or being drunk, by showing them and their friends having a very pleasurable time while under the influence. This encourages the underage audience to try these things in order to experience something similar to what they saw.

Research shows that 90 percent of teens who have seen images of other teens abusing alcohol or drugs on social media first saw such pictures when they were 15 years old or younger, and 50 percent saw them when they were 13 years old or younger.

The negative influence of social media on health, doesn't just apply to teens as adults fall victim to it all too well. In January 2022, on his podcast, Joe Rogan shared with his 11 million podcasts listeners unfactual information regarding COVID-19. Artists such as Niel Young threatened to remove their music from Spotify unless the organization took action. 2 months later on March 28th, 2022, Spotify added a “content advisory warning” to podcasts discussing COVID-19 prompting listeners to COVID-19 Information hub.

Prize Question: Lack of access to information is almost certainly responsible for prolonging the pandemic. What are some trusted resources?

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Whether it be corporations, public health organizations, education systems, or local clinicians, Americans need to be equipped with tools to identify and fight misinformation and rebuild trust in the medical community, as otherwise the worst plague may be yet to hit.

The fact of the matter is people will believe what they want to believe. In order to stop the spread of misinformation, the easiest tool is prevention. Humans are not prone to change their opinions and will pursue information that fits their current interpretation of the world. But there is hope as opinions are swayed by the ones people trust most. In order to combat medical misinformation, trust needs to be rebuilt within the medical community, otherwise the most vulnerable will be harmed.

In order to combat medical misinformation attention needs to be turned towards forming stronger relationships between doctors, nurses and patients. A study conducted at the University of Chicago demonstrated how physicians and patients share similar levels of distrust in the healthcare system. For the public, their trust is highest within doctors (84%) and nurses (85%).

These groups must be united to overcome the plague of Medical Misinformation in America. One step that can be taken is through misinformation education being integrated within general checkup appointments. While social media and public health agencies play an important role, the foundation for trust in the medical system depends on the relationships formed with health professionals. This is why access to healthcare is so important and explains why rural or low-income areas with lack of access to healthcare have their skepticism regarding information around COVID-19. Improved access is needed, or people will get advice from social media. This is an injustice that doesn't just affect those furthest from equity, but our country as a whole.

Visiting physicians regularly needs to be made more accessible through insurance. Currently it is recommended that adults under 50 should only visit their Primary Care Physician (PCP) every 3 years. People in good health do not feel like spending their time or money on this visit, and based on our current social understanding of medicine, that makes sense. Medicine is seen as a way to treat disease, not promote health. To make PCP appointments more valuable the emphasis needs to be turned to wellness. Such as annual visits that include dialogues about our bodies, the media and misinformation, mental health (besides the "have you been depressed in the last 2 weeks survey") and addressing concerns regarding the healthcare system. It would be an opportunity for disease to be prevented or caught earlier. Medical Schools should be required to brief their students on these topics so future doctors are ready to handle skeptical patients.

While this is a call to the healthcare system, as global citizens we play a role in fixing the system. So, before you repost, fact check! It can be tricky as fake sources can look professional. But you can look for the data behind the claims and find other sources on the subject. See if the data is peer reviewed. Ask questions like; What are the author's intentions in sharing this information? What argument is being made? And am I believing this because I want it to be true even if it's wrong? Who is benefiting off of my opinions, and what harm is there in these certain beliefs? In the digital age it is imperative to approach online claims with skepticism, as the public health system rebuilds trust with patients. While this is a societal problem, remember that you have the power to protect yourself from misinformation!

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EVENTS NEXT WEEK

Speakers Dr. Socia Love Thurman and Dr. Rosalina James:
Strength of a Nation
12:00PM

Brave Space Discussions: continuation of speakers themes
Thursdays
12:00PM

Prize from Emails
Announced every Friday

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