

Misinformation: How to prepare students to combat health misinformation?

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Outline

- Study on the reasons against anti-COVID-19 vaccination in Romania and Finland: misinformation, disinformation, etc. - examples from a discussion forum in Romania
- Proposal for a course on Healthcare Communication

Anti-COVID-19 vaccination – Examples

Normative information

- Correct information

Examples extracted from the discussion forum:

- Vaccination can cause blood clots
- Getting vaccinated is not safe because the vaccine is not properly transported and stored at the required temperature, plus the crowd at the places where you get vaccinated, plus you spend 15 minutes after getting vaccinated with another 15-20 people in the same room
- Vaccines are not the elixir of life (it may also be classified as satire / parody – one of the 7 types of misinformation and disinformation according to C. Wardle, 2019)

Disnormative information

- Information which is against the accepted values, the public opinion

Examples:

- Disobeying the doctor's order
- You shouldn't take your medication because it can harm you
- I believe that vaccination kills people

Anti-COVID-19 vaccination – Examples

Misinformation

- False information, but it was not created with the intention of causing harm, I believe it, or I tell it by accident

Examples extracted from the discussion forum:

- **A**s long as the whole population cannot be vaccinated at the same time, new strains will keep appearing and then vaccination is useless (there will be only costs and sequelae)
- Only the elderly and problematic cases should have been vaccinated
- **V**accination is an illusion for getting back to a normal life ("the reality in Israel, Iceland or Gibraltar shows us that we are being sold an illusion")
- The vaccine cannot end the pandemic
- The 3rd dose has no value as long as there are people who did not get the first two doses
- I came in contact with infected people, and nothing happened to me, so I am better protected than I would be by getting vaccinated.
- **P**oliticians are taking advantage of the crisis and attempting to construct totalitarian regimes

Anti-COVID-19 vaccination – Examples

Disinformation

- **False information deliberately created to harm a person / organisation / country**

Examples extracted from the discussion forum:

- Vaccinated people are the main vector spreading new strains
- The vaccine is just now being tested on the population
- The vaccine is as effective as the vitamins

Anti-COVID-19 vaccination – Examples

Propaganda (part of disinformation)

- Not true, but I want to tell the lie
- Information / Communication meant to influence / manipulate people and produce an emotional response

Examples extracted from the discussion forum:

- They want to implant us chips, we will grow scales, they will transform us into zombies
- Anti-COVID-19 vaccination = 666, microchipping, reptiles, 5G
- We are being injected with monkey DNA
- The vaccine is made to sterilize us and reduce the world's population
- A chip will be inserted into the veins through which we will be controlled from America
- It's a Big Pharma conspiracy + corrupt doctors + Bill Gates

Anti-COVID-19 vaccination – Examples

Malinformation

- Real information used to harm a person / organisation / country

Examples extracted from the discussion forum:

- Vaccination is primarily about profit for the pharmaceutical companies
- No one assumes responsibility in the event of an incident; you sign that you voluntarily accept risks by getting vaccinated, this raises serious concerns about the vaccine.

How can we prepare students to combat health misinformation?

- Through education: we must educate them so that they, in turn, can educate the public, either as LIS specialists or as journalists or as specialists in communication
- Absence of education, lack of the skills necessary for accessing valid, correct information, for searching information, for checking the information, all this leads to misinformation

Proposal for a course on Healthcare Communication

Some of the aspects in connection with strategies to combat health misinformation to be covered:

- Health literacy
- Terminology
- Making healthcare decisions based on scientific evidence

The need for health literacy. Exemplification: the recent measles outbreak in Romania

- Situations of vaccination refusal for children
- Lack of health literacy and reliable healthcare information in Romania
- Action is necessary to combat myths and false information

- The need for a long-term strategy and the constant aiming at a thorough education of the population starting from a very early age
- People need information adapted for their use, in a form that they can understand and access
- The low rate of vaccination is also based on a series of superstitions and myths endorsed by the population.

(Madge & Robu, 2021)

Reasons against measles vaccination in Romania

- **R**esearch linking vaccines to autism and cancer
- **O**ther adverse reactions to vaccinations (for example, skin rash and intestinal health problems, etc.)
- **P**eople hearing that children become ill or are left paralysed after being vaccinated
- **T**he idea that vaccines are made from toxic substances (for example mercury or fetal cells)
- Religious or personal beliefs
- People skeptical of modern medicine
- The idea that vaccination is part of an international conspiracy to decrease the population (Byrne, 2017; Lombardi, 2018; NPR, 2018; Madge & Robu, 2021)

Some of the local myths, beliefs and superstitions regarding the treatment against measles

- “Drinking cabbage juice
- Rubbing moonshine on the spots
- Not cleaning the house
- Wearing red scarves
- Good nutrition
- The idea that vaccines do more harm than good”

(Byrne, 2017; Lombardi, 2018; NPR, 2018; Madge & Robu, 2021)

These examples and the presence of these beliefs, myths, and superstitions among groups of population in Romania, some of them from rural areas, indicate a low level of education, and lack of health information literacy.

Proposal for a course on Healthcare Communication

Terminology

- 2 examples

1. Immunization – Vaccination

- “If we get vaccinated, we get rid of COVID-19 and all the restrictions and we can go back to our previous / normal life”. - **false**

2. “Safe” in medicine

- “Vaccination is totally / 100% safe” – **false**

Question:

What can we do when communication from the authorities is not entirely accurate?

Using scientific evidence in making healthcare decisions

- In healthcare we make decisions
- In case of a new disease, people may begin to act irrationally
- How to combat hysterical behaviour of people in case of a healthcare crisis?
- Example: “Dramatic fear about something that is not a real health threat ” vs “the more muted concern about things that really threaten our health—lack of exercise, smoking, eating sugary foods, drinking too much alcohol, not wearing seat belts, owning guns” (Gorman & Gorman, 2017)
- Decisions should be based on scientific evidence rather than feelings

Tools and websites for checking healthcare information

Students should be taught about the tools and websites available for checking healthcare information:

Examples:

- World Health Organization

<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

- Resources of the EU

https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/coronavirus-response/fighting-disinformation_en

- ECDC

<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/covid-19>

Thank you for your attention

Comments and Questions:

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