Strategies for Dealing with Infodemic

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Dear Editor

A global epidemic of misinformation that is rapidly spreading through social networks and other media has put public health at serious risk. "Infodemic" is a combination of the root words "information" and "epidemic" (spread of information).[1] Infodemics are the result of pandemic misinformation that spread rapidly on social media and attracted wide attention of governments and health organizations during the pandemic. The infodemic phenomenon will worsen the epidemic, harm more people, and endanger the accessibility and sustainability of the global health system.[1]

Concerns about the spread of misinformation are almost as old as the World Wide Web itself. A widely published 1997 article in the BMJ revealed that concerns about the spread of misinformation are almost as old as the World Wide Web itself. It drew attention to this issue which available medical information on the Internet is not always reliable. However, what has been learned during 20 years of infodemiology research is that the health information quality is an elusive concept because, in medicine, it is not always easy to discern the truth, especially in a rapidly evolving situation.[2]

Misinformation refers to information not supported by scientific evidence and expert opinion.[3] There have been numerous cases where misinformation has been associated to negative public health outcomes) in countries around the world, including outbreaks of the Zika virus,[4] Covid-19, and vaccine-preventable infectious diseases.[5]

Every disease outbreak is accompanied by an information tsunami, and in the meantime, the existence of false information, rumors, etc. is inevitable. This phenomenon even existed in the Middle Ages. However, in the current era, the difference is in social networks which strengthen this phenomenon and cause false information to spread faster and more. Therefore, this issue is a new challenge, and the main problem is timing because if you want to cover this gap, you have to be fast. What is at risk during an outbreak is ensuring that people do the right thing to control the disease or mitigate its effects. Therefore, the task of information is not only to inform people, but also to ensure that they are aware of the right and appropriate actions.

One of the important findings of the studies is that economically disadvantaged countries are more exposed to infodemic than wealthier countries and are generally more prone to believe misinformation after disclosure. Users in these countries have limited access to health care, which may make them receptive to unconventional health behaviors.[6,7] The spread of infodemic can increase the burden of the epidemic in these countries because the inequality of health information increases global health inequalities.[8]

The World Health Organization has launched a new information network called EPI-WIN, which stands for World Health Organization Information Network for Epidemics. The purpose of this network is to use multiple amplifiers to share appropriate information among specific target groups.[9] When rumors and misinformation are spreading from social networks, EPI-WIN network publishes an answer based on reliable sources with the help of experts. What is being done in the field of social networks is to make sure when someone searches on Facebook, Twitter, or Google about epidemic or similar words; there is a section where

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people are directed to reliable information such as the World Health Organization website either the website of the Ministry of Health of that country or the Center for Disease Control.

Review

Social media is already playing a positive role in reducing infodemic, but we cannot ignore the impact of the large amount of misinformation and rumors that still exist on social media. Policy- makers should be aware of the dangers of misinformation on social media. Also, the users who spread unverified information and misinformation related to the pandemic must be punished.

Second, measures can be taken to increase trust in the media and reduce pandemic misinformation. Many studies have identified health care providers as one of the most trusted sources of information, so one possible way to increase trust in media is to encourage health care providers to play a role in social networks. In particular, health care professionals can be encouraged to create dedicated social media accounts and use social media platforms to spread science, proactively answer questions about the pandemic, and clear up misconceptions about it. In addition, influential leaders and celebrities can also the epidemic with correct information. As a result, the influence of these leaders should be fully used in the rapid and widespread dissemination of correct information. Therefore, influential leaders are suggested to promote the correct information about the epidemic on social media.

Third, we need to improve people's health information literacy to reduce misinformation and rumors, and this requires the joint efforts of many parties. Officials can teach people how to recognize the veracity of information about the pandemic. In addition, they can provide authentic access to relevant information through various social media or other channels. Social media companies can set up authenticity alerts on social media to remind users that they should be aware of the correctness of the content they are viewing on social media and obtain health-related information, as well as improve their ability to screen information.

Conclusion

Weak implementation and uncoordinated management of the infodemic may lead to unwanted consequences such as people's confusion, adoption of incorrect and dangerous behaviors, lack of trust in the healthcare system, effectiveness reduction of prevention and control actions, and increase in the consequences of outbreaks. For this reason, the World Health Organization launched a network to deal with infodemic called EPI-WIN, which

stands for World Health Organization Information Network for Epidemics and explained that when an emergency event occurs in society, the need to updated information will be increased and people in such cases turn to sources that are reliable for them. WHO identifies these trusted sources, which may be individuals, organizations, representatives, and employers, and disseminates EPI-WIN information to their networks. The various sectors of EPI-WIN are as follows.

1. Infodemic management

Infodemic management uses many skillsets to prioritize and solve the issue of too much and inaccurate information. WHO has published 'Public health research agenda for managing Infodemic'.

The 1st WHO infodemic manager training was conducted in November 2020 for awareness and training. Various events were also conducted, which included the 'WHO infodemic management conference' and many others. All these will definitely help every sector at every level to create awareness and the importance of information.

2. EPI-WIN update

The first update of 22nd Jan 2020 started the process of EPI-WIN updates, which is still going on with the latest update no 53. These updates have covered almost all aspects of the epidemics from the introduction of the virus and the epidemic to precautions, infodemic, vaccines, medication, social life, diagnosis, testing, the transmission of disease, etc. Each article tries to give an insight related to the pandemic.

3. The Collective service

Initiated in June 2020, the collective service is a partnership between the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO). The Collective Service will support the delivery of the Global Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) Strategy. The four main key approaches for RCCE are:

1. Strengthening common and coordinated RCCE approaches

2. Generating real-time data on community perspectives

3. Improving the quality and consistency of community engagement approaches,

4. Strengthening the capacity of national governments, institutions, and organizations, and reinforce local solutions.

The collective service will enhance awareness at all levels to ensure safety for mankind.

4. EPI-WIN webinars

Various webinars are conducted by the WHO for information and awareness of the pandemic. These pandemic webinars have played an essential role in imparting information effectively at every level and all sectors of the industry.

5. Youth Engagement

Today's youth have a very important role to play in responding to the pandemic at all levels in their respective countries. Their contribution will helpto overcome the hurdles during these times. Thus, WHO is partnering with youth networks and youth-led initiatives representatives to spread WHO's recommendations and awareness programs.

This kind of initiative will surely help the present and future emergency situations globally. EPI-WIN can also be used as a guideline tool to establish various informative trainings and webinars for all types of organizations.

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