World Health Organization

Combating the spread of medical disinformation

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Introduction

Medical disinformation has been an issue for a long time, but with the dawn of the technological age the danger increased. As everyone now can share their opinion with a large audience, even if their opinion is not qualified it has created a problem regarding the information, which people obtain about healthcare. This becomes a major issue in situations, when people need clear and factual medical advice, for an example during a pandemic.

Medical disinformation is dangerous for multiple reasons. First of all, are people provided with false information, regarding medical situations and healthcare. In worst case scenarios, this can lead to the wrong response to a medical emergency, thereby potentially making it worse and more deadly than it already is. Second, medical disinformation can spread unnecessary fear, panic and stress as situations can be depicted in a way, which leads people to believe that a situation is far worse, than actually the case. On the opposite side, medical disinformation can also depict a situation less serious, than it actually is, thereby ensuring people are not aware of the true danger.

Due to these reasons, it is crucial for all of humanity to find a solution which is effective and capable of stopping the spread of medical disinformation as good as possible, without interfering with the right of free speech. Such solutions could include the improvement of fact checking organs by social media companies or education on various topics, in order to limit the effectiveness of medical disinformation and the spread of misinformation.

Definition of Key Terms

Medical Disinformation

Medical Disinformation defines false or misleading information related to healthcare and medicine. It can be spread both intentionally and unintentionally in all kinds of ways such as social media and online forms. It is not limited to the digital world.

Misinformation

False or misleading information shared without intentions of harming individuals in any kind of way. It is often the case due to false sources or misunderstanding.

Conspiracy theory

Theories which are unfounded, implausible and not scientifically proven. Conspiracy Theories are not limited to topics related to healthcare.

Pseudoscience

Claims or theories which appear or are claimed to be scientifically proven and supported, but in fact lack any kind of proof and recognition by the scientific community.

Infodemic

A term used to describe the rapid and extensive spread of misinformation, especially during health crises, such as a pandemic

Echo Chambers

Online platforms or groups, which consist of people, which believe the same thing. This is dangerous as they then possibly lack a perspective of a topic and are encouraged that their opinion is the only true one.

Health Misinformation Disseminators

Individuals or groups that spread disinformation intentionally. This is often done for financial or ideological gain.

Media Literacy

Media literacy describes the ability to critically assess information gained through all kinds of sources, such as TV-News, Social Media or other Online Platforms.

Evidence-Based Medicine

This describes Medicine based on evidence and scientific information and research.

Vaccine hesitancy

A vaccine hesitancy describes a phenomenon, where people reject a vaccine, due to medical disinformation.

General Overview

Medical Disinformation has become a huge threat to modern society, as it instills false knowledge in people and increases the chances of a wrong assessment of the situation. In order to fully illustrate this statement, a look at the covid pandemic is sufficient.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit the world in 2019 most people did not know how to act or how to assess the situation, due to the long time, which had passed since the last global pandemic. This insecurity led to an increase in medical disinformation.

Conspiracy Theories

Conspiracy theories flourished during the outbreak of Covid-19, due to the fact that people were in an unusual situation. Most people had never experienced a global pandemic before and were therefore vulnerable to disinformation, especially conspiracy theories. One of the most popular ones stated the Chinese government had produced the virus in order to destabilize the west. This, along with the fact that the virus originated in China, led to a drastic increase in violence against people of Asian descent, even if they were not Chinese. Another conspiracy theory was the one concerning the safety of covid vaccines. The fact that the vaccines were developed as a high priority and therefore fairly quickly, led many people to develop a certain amount of suspicion, regarding the vaccine. Due to this various theories arouse quickly. For example some of these theories claim increased risks for blood clots or immunosuppression. A more grotesque theory was that the vaccine was produced by the government in order to control the citizens of the world. This led to serious vaccine hesitancy.

Dismissal and exaggeration of the situation

During the Pandemic multiple rumors were established with the help of medical disinformation. Some of these rumors dismissed the danger of the virus, which led to people being less careful and thereby increasing the infection numbers, whilst others exaggerated the situation by installing unnecessary panic, leading people to stockpiling essentials in times where these were needed the most.

False treatment

During the pandemic many treatment and prevention measures were spread through social media, online platforms and even state media. For an example was one statement made, that a certain amount of Vodka a day would kill the virus, if it were to enter the body. Another claim stated that the drinking of disinfection fluids would hinder the virus in entering and damaging the body. Such statements obviously caused more damage than good and even led to deaths in extreme cases.

Consequences

As already stated above, with the help of the example of Covid-19, the consequences of medical disinformation can be disastrous and numerous. People can suffer serious harm from false treatment proposals, get uncareful, thereby endangering themselves and everybody else, or panic and begin stockpiling essentials. These are the reasons medical disinformation must be limited. In the worst case it can lead a whole society to a collapse, as we were close to multiple times during the covid pandemic.

Major Parties Involved

World Health Organization (WHO)

As the United Nations organization responsible for questions concerning healthcare and medical aspects, the WHO plays an important role in the combat against medical disinformation, by providing guidance, promoting accurate and scientific-proven health information and proposing guidelines.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

UNESCO plays an important role in the combating of disinformation, as it promotes media and information literacy, in order for individuals to critically evaluate their sources. Furthermore, it educates societies on general information, thereby making them less vulnerable to the spread of false information.

The European Union (EU)

The European Union has established its own educational and media awareness programs, such as the European Digital Media Observatory, in order to increase media literacy within the European Union.

Social Media Companies

Social Media Companies, such as Meta, Twitter and Google, have taken steps in order to combat medical disinformation. Examples of such are the installation of fact-checkers or the promotion of certified medical information.

Medical Associations

Medical Associations, such as the American Medical Association (AMA) or the British Medical Association (BMA), have taken steps against medical disinformation, by for example, promoting medical and scientific information.

The International Fact-Checking network (IFCN)

The IFCN is an international and independent fact checking organization, which checks multiple sources and reports disinformation of any kind, including medical.

Timeline of Key Events

Date	Description of event

1960s-1980s	Medical disinformation still occurs through traditional media channels, such as newspapers, magazines and radios.
1976	The DPT vaccine controversy arises, which claims the vaccine has unwanted side effects. This installs panic in the population.
1980s-1990s	Pseudoscientific alternative medicine practices gain popularity.
1990s	The popularity of the internet increases.
Late 1990s	Online healthcare forums begin to arise.
2000s	The rise of social media increases the spread of health-related information and thereby the spread of disinformation.
2007	The online "anti-vax" movement gains popularity and installs a vaccine hesitancy.
2014	The outbreak of Ebola further increases the spread of false information, related to healthcare.
2018	The WHO declares vaccine hesitancy as a top threat
September 2017	UNESCO releases 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training
2019	With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, medical disinformation spreads even further than before
2022	Governments worldwide vow to intensify the efforts against medical disinformation following the Covid-19 pandemic

UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

- The promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet, 5th of July 2018 (A/HRC/RES/38/7)
- Countering disinformation for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, 10th of January 2022 (A/RES/76/227)

Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

Attempts to solve the issue of medical disinformation have been closely connected to the solving of the problem of disinformation in general. Therefore the resolution passed by the general assembly in February of 2022 is of high importance. In this resolution the United Nations recognizes the need of cooperation with private business enterprises to solve the problem. Furthermore it emphasizes that disinformation is becoming a bigger problem, as the reach of the internet and social media grows. Even so, this resolution lacks concrete ideas to improve the situation at hand, as it does not outline a clear plan of action. As this resolution is only one and a half years old, at time of writing, one can say that it is a good base with room for improvements and more concrete and clear guidelines, intended to solve this issue.

In addition to the UN-Resolution, many social media platforms already employ fact checkers, which check posts, which have been reported multiple times as being disinformation. This is once again a starting point, but the fact checkers are limited by the human limits. For an example will they not be able to check all posts or be completely neutral.

Organizations such as the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) conduct independent fact checking but are once again limited similar to the fact-checkers of social media platforms.

Possible Solutions

Disinformation is an issue, which is hard to solve, due to the sheer number of individuals, which are intentionally or unintentionally involved in the process. Nevertheless it is possible to limit it as much as possible.

The first measure, which needs to be considered is education. Proper and universal education on both the fields of disinformation and on healthcare, would be a big benefit, as it could teach the brought population to be critical regarding their sources, thereby making it harder for disinformation to spread. A basic education on healthcare could also be beneficial, not only in the way that it would help saving lives, but also that a certain amount of knowledge on healthcare would give the population a knowledge base, with which they would be able to be more critical, regarding the spread of information on healthcare. Such education could be achieved by special workshops in schools, as especially younger people are endangered, ad-campaigns, and workshops, lessons and lectures for the brought public.

Furthermore the establishment of a task force monitoring the evolution of medical disinformation would be beneficial. Such an organization could report new activities, give advice and

establish a public accessible database with certified news spreaders, which inform the public about healthcare.

In addition to this, a cooperation with big social media companies is in place, as social media platforms are one of the main locations of the spread of medical disinformation. For an example could independent fact checkers be installed, in order to minimize the spread of disinformation. In order to do this effectively, a way must be found which allows an algorithm or artificial intelligence to do so, as a human can only fact check a certain amount of reports and will never be completely neutral.

As a last resort harsh financial punishments must be considered for social platforms and the individuals spreading the disinformation. An example of this is Germany, which has used this tactic with great success. Even if this is the case, the implementation of such measures must be done with caution, as it may be seen as an impairment to free speech. This would be due to the fact, that punishments are given, based on the utterances made by an individual.

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Appendix or Appendices

i.   The United Nations resolution passed in February of 2022: https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2F76%2F227&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False