

Research Report

**World Health Organisation**

The Question of Medical Misinformation



**Background Information**

In the wake of the Covid – 19 pandemic medical misinformation and issues such as vaccine hesitancy have become more pressing matters. Previously being “anti vax” was seen as a fringe and conspiratorial position. Now however, it has entered the political mainstream (especially regarding the Covid vaccine). This doesn’t just have negative impacts on trust in medical institutions, it objectively results in more deaths and lowered herd immunity. Bringing back trust in these systems is no easy task and studies have shown then when shown real information that should convince them the other way many people only become more steadfast in their beliefs.

It is for this reason that traditional methods of de – radicalisation will not work on a large scale. Once someone is radicalized and inducted into the conspiracy it is arguably to late to save them. Some have argued that preventative measures should be taken to shut down those who perpetrate these controversial beliefs. But can this be done without infringing upon their freedom of speech? If not, is it still worth it?

It is not just non state actors who are to blame. Some governments and senior politicians in those governments have promoted medical misinformation and spoken against the accepted science. This is especially prevalent in populist politicians who attempt to spread doubt about the efficacy of vaccines in service of a political agenda.

Medical misinformation can have concrete medical consequences. Widespread vaccine use is required to ensure herd immunity among a population to a given virus. If this is not achieved the virus will be able to stay much longer than previously possible, multiplying the death counts exponentially. Some argue that this means vaccine use should not necessarily be a solely personal choice, it is one that affects the whole population and can cause harm outside of just the person taking the extra risk.

Some people are concerned, however, that in supressing medical misinformation there is a potential danger to free speech. In many countries it is a legal right to promote false or misleading information. Some social media companies took it upon themselves to try and limit misinformation on their websites, utilizing their terms of service that allow them to ban certain figures for almost any reason. The effectiveness of these measures has been debatable and some believe it sets a dangerous precedent about how companies will be able to limit the voice those with certain views have on their website, especially if the same logic is used in the future against genuine human rights organizations. The ability for governments to force social media companies to supress certain views may be useful in the short term but the long term consequences of such a move could be dire.

Medical misinformation is not an issue that can be sold per se and is particularly difficult to deal with in developing countries. Potential “Solutions” are either limited in effectiveness or could threaten the institutions and liberty of the countries that utilise them. The committee must consider whether this is worth the risk and whether those perpetrating the information should be held liable for the damage that results from their speech.

**Useful Links:**

<https://www.un.org/en/coronavirus/access-information-cure-disinformation>

<https://www.un.org/en/battling-covid-19-misinformation-hands>

<https://www.un.org/en/countering-disinformation>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK572169/>