

Infodemic in a pandemic – critical thinking needed

Trish Patton provides some useful evaluation tools for GPs to help root out all the misinformation and fake news that pervades Covid-19 discourse

“We need a vaccine against misinformation”

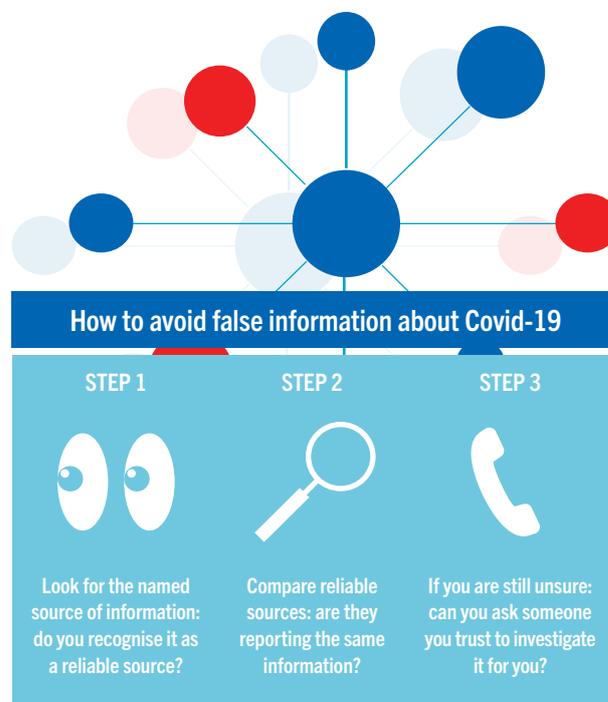
– Dr Mike Ryan, World Health Organization

A WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION (WHO) report dated February 2 warned of “a massive infodemic” – an overabundance of information, some accurate and some not, that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it.¹ This was due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the myths, rumours and misinformation surrounding the virus that began circulating on social media, which “allowed disinformation to spread and flourish at unprecedented speeds”.² The term ‘infodemic’ was coined in 2003 but has seen renewed usage in recent times due to Covid-19.³ A recent article found that misinformation about Covid-19 is a major threat to public health and suggested that interventions that aim to improve critical thinking and trust in science may be a promising avenue for future research.⁴ This article will examine some useful evaluation tools that can help you to think critically about the information you find.

Even pre-Covid, the conversation about fake news and misinformation had started, as an overwhelming amount of information is now available and accessible to everyone due to the exponential growth of social media. This viral spread of information or misinformation carries its own risks.⁵ Health misinformation spreads quickly on the internet and has many negative consequences. False narratives can cause undue panic and fear and can erode people’s trust in more credible sources of information.

It is getting harder to tell fact from fiction and it is more important than ever to start to question the information we receive and not accept it at face value. Back in February, a Health Science Libraries Group (HSLG) seminar focused on ‘Research Integrity’ and keynote speaker Prof Declan Devane spoke about enabling people to think critically about health claims and choices.⁶ Prof Devane said he found mistrust to be widespread.

Recent high-profile media debates about the use of statins to prevent CVD, of Tamiflu to treat flu and of the HPV vaccine to prevent cervical cancer have opened up public debate about medical and scientific claims. These debates have asked whether the underpinning evidence for the use of licensed medicines is robust, relevant to the patient population and trustworthy, or has been commu-



nicated accurately in an accessible way. Prof Devane also introduced the key concepts of informed health choices,⁷ which provide a framework for developing and evaluating resources to help people learn to think critically about treatment claims.⁸

GPs are in a good position to advise patients about treatments. There is an excellent guideline available from the ICGP on ‘Communicating Risk to Patients’⁹ and a new website was launched this year to allow users to check the reliability of a health claim.¹⁰ The HSE has also produced helpful advice on dealing with misinformation during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹

The ‘Be Media Smart’¹² campaign was developed by members of Media Literacy Ireland to help people tell the difference between reliable and accurate information and deliberately false or misleading information. It asks people to stop (judge whether the information is accurate and reliable), think (about what the information is for) and check (where your information is coming from, ie. the source).

The CRAP Test¹³ was developed by librarian Molly Beestrum and is a helpful tool to use when deciding on the credibility of a website. It advises people to evaluate four major areas: currency, reliability, authority and purpose.

SPAT¹⁴ is a research-tested mnemonic tool developed in 2008 by the University of Pittsburgh for evaluating the reliability of health-related web pages. The mnemonic stands for: site, publisher, audience and timeliness.

DISCERN

DISCERN¹⁵ is a brief questionnaire that enables patients and information providers to judge the quality of written

information about treatment choices. To evaluate content itself, the DISCERN instrument was developed in 1996/1997 as a joint collaboration between the UK National Health Service and the British Library.

This freely available instrument measures 16 items pertaining to markers of information quality (eg. reliability, relevance, balance and description of a treatment's risks and benefits).¹⁶

Conclusion

Decision-makers and medical professionals need access to the best available scientific evidence. The ICGP's librarians play an important role in searching for evidence to ensure that members have access to published information that is reliable, relevant and up to date so as to maintain and improve the quality of patient care.

The ICGP has a Clinical Hub on Covid-19. Available at www.icgp.ie, the Hub has collated trusted sources of information on Covid-19 to help GPs keep abreast of rapidly changing research findings. 

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Useful websites and tools for evaluating health information:

- Informed Health Choices: <https://www.informedhealthchoices.org/>
- iHealthFacts: <https://ihealthfacts.ie/>
- Be Media Smart: <https://www.bemediasmart.ie/>
- CRAP: <https://sites.google.com/site/crapcraaptest/>
- SPAT: <http://www.spat.pitt.edu/>
- DISCERN: <http://www.discern.org.uk/>

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