

Hidden risks of health tips on social media

Social media may be entertaining, but it is not always a reliable source of health-related information.

Such information must be backed by medical evidence. Blindly following social media health updates may lead to detrimental health outcomes. On many occasions, it is really difficult to distinguish between correct and incorrect information.

Over the last decade, organisations and individuals have posted an immense amount of information which could not be verified. It seems to have increased during and after the covid outbreak.

Platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and YouTube are exceedingly popular on social media. Users contribute health-related content on these platforms for other users to consume. Sadly, there has been minimal emphasis on the regulation and ethical governance associated with this issue.

It is important to distinguish disinformation from misinformation. Disinformation is false and misleading information deliberately created and disseminated with the intention to deceive and manipulate others. It is done with a specific agenda, like financial gain or propaganda. The information may seem attractive, but it can be dangerous.

Misinformation is false or inaccurate information that is shared without any intent to deceive. It is done unintentionally without verification. Messages forwarded on WhatsApp without checking their authenticity are a common example.

The term "infodemic" refers to a vast amount of information disseminated through digital and non-digital media during a disease outbreak. It includes both legitimate scientific information and misleading false narratives. It becomes

● **Gautam Mukhopadhyay** is a surgical oncologist trained at the Tata Memorial Hospital, Mumbai. At present, he is the clinical lead of surgical oncology at Narayana Health



HEALING POTION

GAUTAM MUKHOPADHYAY

very difficult to distinguish between various health updates. However, in emergencies, accurate information is extremely necessary.

Social media can raise awareness quickly and mobilise community support.

Influencers are people with a large following on social media. They are from various backgrounds. Some of them are an important source of health information. It has developed into a new profession. Many influencers use a style of communication which enables them to build close connections with their followers. The influencer is perceived as a friend. This is called "parasocial relationships". It is a one-sided relationship where the followers feel a bond despite no direct or

personal interaction.

An influencer from Hollywood with around 360 million Instagram followers made an interesting observation. The influencer encouraged a full-body screening with magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) as a preventive health check-up. Such a suggestion seems attractive. But it is based on an assumption, not evidence. This test is without proven benefits and linked to overdiagnosis, unnecessary interventions and costs.

However, it may be difficult to convince the followers.

There are various harmful effects of misleading advice.

Influencers should not act beyond their area of expertise. If necessary, they must consult with a medical

professional before uploading medical information.

Some influencers promote products for financial gain. There may also be a personal bias without any reliable evidence. Health-related information labelled as "issued in public interest" may just be advertisements.

Even medical influencers have been accused of using social media for self-promotion, branding and increased visibility.

There is no doubt that social media has increased medical interaction and common people have benefited immensely. Various health-related myths have been debunked. There have been many data-sharing platforms. Patients have gained from medical updates by experts and have been able to share

their own experiences.

Despite all the possible benefits, serious questions remain.

The accuracy gap between assumptions and evidence of medical information needs to be bridged. Medical experts cannot be replaced by non-medical influencers.

Usually, information provided by accredited health professionals and academic institutions is correct. It is important to verify the source of information. Discussing with medical experts or exploring the websites of leading hospitals may be useful.

It needs to be understood that social media cannot be the only source of medical information. Also, any commercial angle should be probed. Posts claiming miracles or guaranteed cures must be ignored.

Sometimes the information may be correct but outdated. Newer concepts and evidence are available. In Italy, high-reach influencers must register with the national media authority. They must comply with the formal code of conduct, including avoiding misleading or harmful health content.

In France, legislation prohibits influencers from providing incorrect and harmful health information. They can incur fines or prison terms.

Patient privacy should always be maintained. Doctors on social media are definitely a new normal. Some consider that not being on social media is a huge missed opportunity.

However, doctors must maintain professional boundaries, discipline and decorum. Providing public health education and countering false information is necessary.

Finally, the social media platforms must be made accountable. Medical fact checkers should be appointed. Steps need to be taken to increase digital literacy in health-related posts. Medical evidence does not differ in different countries.

Health-related issues are sensitive. It can change the course of life. Unregulated free speech in social media regarding medical issues must be addressed.