Association of American Medical Colleges and CDC Launch Program to Address Medical Misinformation

By Steve Smith

Looking back on the past two years of our COVID-19 "new normal" it is clear that medical misinformation has been one of the most stubborn obstacles to stopping the spread of COVID-19 or diminishing its effects.

The Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), in cooperation with the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), has introduced a new grant program to address medical misinformation and vaccine hesitancy through health professions education.

The goal of the *AAMC Health Professions Education Curricular Innovations Grant Program* is for learners in medical, nursing, and pharmacy schools to demonstrate improvements in their capacity to communicate about health information and dispel misinformation, myths, and disinformation surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

Battling back against misinformation, particularly around the coronavirus and vaccines, is a tall order. Training tomorrow's healthcare providers to deal with the problem head-on seems like an effective approach.

As we've seen in recent months, medical misinformation and vaccine hesitancy are not limited to COVID-19, so the arrival of a program like this one couldn't have come sooner. Recent public health developments include monkeypox, which has now been declared a public health emergency, and a resurgence of polio. The latter, a disease that had been eradicated in the United States through one of the most effective vaccination programs ever conducted, is almost certainly the result of the refusal by parents to have their school-aged children vaccinated (According to information on the CDC website, All 50 states and the District of Columbia have state laws that require children entering childcare or public schools to have certain vaccinations. The CDC recommends that all children get four doses of inactivated polio vaccine, with the fourth dose at 4 to 6 years of age, before or at school entry).

The relation between vaccine hesitancy and consumers' information sources

It's been widely reported that a torrent of medical misinformation has dampened the public trust in the COVID-19 vaccine. As I ranted in my September 2021 blog post, The Washington Post reported at the time that one in 500 Americans had died of Covid. But even as we passed that grim milestone, many Americans refused to abjure vaccine conspiracy theories, behave with a healthier sense of community, or get the vaccine.

According to an NYU School of Global Health study, people who rely on "informal" information sources, like their family, friends or social media, are less likely to be updated on the latest

COVID-19 information and to engage in protective behaviors like social distancing and mask wearing. The survey of 6,518 adults living in the United States assessed the association between an individual's primary source of COVID-19 information and its influence on their knowledge and protective behavior.

And the influence of misinformation extended beyond the mere wearing, or not wearing, of facemasks. From 2019 to 2020 there was an unprecedented surge in tantrums by airline passengers and restaurant patrons, and violence against health care workers.

This presents – to use the grandest of understatements – a challenge for public health messaging and message delivery. When the loudest uneducated and unbridled voices are dominating social media channels with misinformation and sermonizing mistrust in the government, it is difficult for public health authorities to break through with accurate, science-based information.

Several popular "alternative facts" pundits, while publicly denouncing the vaccine, privately availed themselves and their families of its protections (in some high-profile examples because their employers required them to do so).

See also: A Pandemic of the Unvaccinated and the Misinformed

Five medical schools are subgrantees

After releasing an RFP and conducting a competitive national search and careful consideration by a diverse multi-rater review team, the AAMC has announced five **Health Professions Education Curricular Innovations** subgrantees, adding that the projects selected offer innovative educational approaches and strategies as well as well-developed plans to ensure that the skills gained in the educational program are transferable to various health topics.

The subgrantee institutions and their projects are as follows:

Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine at Hofstra/Northwell

Project Title: Patients Vulnerable to Misinformation: An Evidence-Based Approach to Address Root Causes Through Medical, Nursing, and Pharmacy Student Training

Project Leader: Samara Ginzburg, MD

Florida International University Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine

Project Title: Addressing Vaccine Misinformation: An Online Motivational Interviewing Module and Telehealth Standardized Patient Exercise to Address Misinformation With COVID-19 Vaccine-Hesitant Individuals

Project Leader: Rebecca Toonkel, MD

Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at the University at Buffalo

Project Title: Mitigating Medical Misinformation and Mistrust through Effective Team Communication Using Innovative Competency-Based Interprofessional Instructional Design Strategies

Project Leader: Alison Vargovich, PhD

Maine Medical Center/Tufts University School of Medicine

Project Title: Interprofessional Education and Collaborative Learning: A Novel Training Tool for Addressing COVID-19 Health Misinformation

Project Leader: Jennifer Hayman, MD

The University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine

Project Title: Training Interprofessional Teams to Improve Scientific Communication and Address Health Misinformation in Diverse Communities

Project Leader: Vineet Arora, MD

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