
Letter

Combatting infodemics for a sustainable healthcare systemSoichiro SAEKI^{*,2*} and Masako SHIMATO^{3*}

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In December 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO)¹⁾ released the “Call for Action: Managing the Infodemic” in order to “promote access to health information and mitigate harm from health misinformation among online and offline communities”. WHO defines “Infodemic” as the information spread with an epidemic, which, if not managed accordingly, could potentially bring harm to health²⁾.

Of all the information that flows through a community, it is especially the sensational medical information that rapidly spreads, propagates fear and threatens the health of the population. Fear permeates and instigates people to believe in misinformation³⁾, creating a vicious cycle. This trend has been due to the popularity of social networking services (SNS)⁴⁾ vastly providing unscientific information. It can also delay the acceptance of appropriate public health measures and endorse methods promoting the spread of the virus⁵⁾. To make matters worse, misinterpretations founded upon personal ties and disseminated across the community are difficult to dispel⁶⁾. As people become more dependent on SNS to create strong virtual connections while physical contacts are restricted, SNS can become a hotbed of misinformation, potentially exacerbating a public health crisis.

However, if used appropriately, SNS can serve as an essential tool to create a sustainable, resilient society against the current and future healthcare catastrophes. The utilization of SNS has potentials to accelerate global collaborations and interactions. With the Internet widely spread across the globe, we can now easily access the information collected overseas in other languages, learn from initiatives in other societies trying to be more resistant to public health crises,

and improve social inclusion by increasing the social presence of the underrepresented population groups, such as the youth. In addition, SNS can provide opportunities for public health specialists to disseminate essential information among the population, as well as to observe how the population adapts to the dynamic situation while avoiding physical contacts⁷⁾. Accurate information on the SNS has potentials to outweigh commonly accepted misinformation and also to influence especially the younger population, for whom the SNS gains immense popularity⁸⁾. Hence, what we need is the correct information in the right platform, at the right time, targeted towards the right population. Public health specialists should inform the general public in a clear, concise and catchy manner especially about the latest preventive measures, including basic hygiene techniques and rationales behind social distancing, and about the medical evidence without jargons. They should also challenge potentially harmful information on the SNS. As it is the youth that build the future society⁹⁾, public health stakeholders should utilize the SNS to have intimate dialogues with them and build a solid relationship¹⁰⁾. Long-term trust creates a strong, harmonious society against pandemics and infodemics that are yet to come.

Healthcare specialists love new medical technologies. However, we have been less enthusiastic with novel communication systems, particularly in establishing relationships with the public in the SNS. This is one of the main reasons why most misinformation has been paid little attention or why the youth have been underrepresented in decision-making processes to establish a strong healthcare system.

The problem raised by the WHO probably takes more than months to overcome. It is an unprecedented call for global unity against uncountable waves of misinformation. If utilized sensibly and effectively, SNS can become the foundation for individuals to actively involve themselves in the prevention and the control of outbreaks of both infectious diseases and misinformation. For a robust, sustainable healthcare system for all, public health policymakers, healthcare specialists, and, finally last but not least, each member of the general public must reaffirm the power of wide-spread information and the importance of intimate communications among themselves. Tough times bring oppor-

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tunity. By harnessing the various vehement-natured medias and tools to improve social inclusivity, we can together overcome the simultaneous hits of the current, and also the future pandemics and infodemics.

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