

Advance/Access

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Media Literacy Fellow

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Warm up question

- **Where have you learned about health information in 2020?**
- **Try to think of everywhere (from people, from websites, from agencies, from social media, etc.)**

Second warm-up question

- Have you ever used any wellness products or have you known someone that has?

Today's topics

- Medical “influencers”
- Rumor managers

What do you think the term “medical influencer” means?

Earlier this year

a well-known doctor named
Dominique Fradin-Read told
thousands of viewers tuning into an
Instagram Live video that she had an
answer: "one of the best ways to
prevent and fight COVID-19."

Dr. Dominique Read, founder of @vitalifemd and Gucci Westman, @gucciwestman, founder of @westmanatelier go live to discuss immunity-boosting tips for #quarantine!



Dr. Fradin-Read is a prominent figure in
the wellness community

She owns the medical practice
VitaLifeMD in Los Angeles and has
helped formulate supplements for
actor Gwyneth Paltrow's brand

This time, on Instagram, Fradin-Read was promoting more than just "wellness"

In the face of a deadly pandemic, she claimed to have an "FDA-approved" medicine that worked like "magic." Fradin-Read made similar claims on her practice's social media accounts. If patients followed her advice, including getting regular injections of this drug, she said, "maybe the virus will not be that hard to fight."

April 19, 2020



VitaLife MD

@VitaLifeMD

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Thymosin Alpha-1 peptide injections are one of the best ways to prevent and fight COVID-19 🧐

Swipe through to learn more, and email us to find out if you are eligible for this peptide treatment!

Such claims were, at best, misleading.

At worst, the recommendations could put patients' health at risk. The drug has never been approved by the FDA for any condition, nor has it been proven safe or effective for treating COVID-19. The company has also been accused of alleged violations of lab safety standards.

An NPR investigation

found that Fradin-Read is one of more than 30 medical practices that have made unproven claims about this drug on their websites and on social media. It remains unclear how many Americans may have taken the drug since the pandemic began, though one doctor said she had prescribed it to more than 100 patients.

What do you think of this statement?

Fradin-Read defended her practice's prescriptions of thymosin alpha-1 and said she believed the drug was safe and effective

NPR's investigation revealed how these
misleading claims proliferate

Three elements are necessary:

- Laboratories manufacture, promote and supply the drug
- Doctors market the drug and prescribe it to patients
- Government agencies with responsibility for regulating drugs and misleading advertising fail to deter many offenders amid a flood of coronavirus-related scams

Unclear if the doctors promoting these drugs were aware of these problems

- However, they received their message: During the pandemic, the CEO said, "If [patients] can only afford one product, this would be the one for both prophylaxis and treatment."
- Most of the medical practices that promoted the drug are not specialized in infectious diseases but rather focus on plastic surgery or promote "wellness," "anti-aging" and "regenerative" medicine

Questions:

- What is it about a pandemic that makes people vulnerable to misinformation?

What do you think of this statement?

In an interview with NPR, Lindgren said she began prescribing thymosin alpha-1 early on in the pandemic "to give people something that they can do [so] that they felt like they weren't helpless." And because she viewed the drug as so safe, she said, that "it was better than doing nothing, in my opinion."

Ultimately NPR found

- For the companies involved it was worth the risk – the regulatory agency was overwhelmed

NPR investigation can be found here

<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/01/914433778/web-of-wellness-doctors-promote-injections-of-unproven-coronavirus-treatment>

Rumor manager

- What do you think this is? How would you make a job description for such a position?

Dr. Heidi Larson is something of a
rumor manager

- Her main job is to to build trust among the public in vaccines mostly through the media
- In effect she hunts viral rumors about real viruses

Dr. Larson

- is obsessed with the origin and evolution of rumors, which she calls “collective problem solving”
- has come to see most anti-vaxxers — a term she considers too oppositional — not as uneducated, science-denying individualists but as people with genuine questions and doubts in search of guidance
- “This is a public cry to say, ‘Is anyone listening?’”

Dr. Larson

- “I saw how much of the communication strategies were very much driven by what the public health community and immunization people thought the public needed to know. But they weren’t responding to what people’s concerns were, or issues, or questions.”

Dr. Larson founded The Vaccine
Confidence Project in 2010

It monitors news, social-media and
community conversations in nearly
every country and 63 languages to
learn of rumors that might undermine
acceptance of critical vaccines

According to Pew Research

- the share of adult Americans who say they would “definitely” or “probably” get a Covid-19 vaccine fell from 72 percent in May to 51 percent in September

According to this project

- influential groups can have an enormous impact very quickly
- the viral spread of misinformation on the internet plays a key role
- people can change their minds very quickly

3,000 people in Britain were asked: If a Covid-19 vaccine existed, would you definitely take it?

54 percent said yes. Then most were shown a series of negative social media posts, including a post from an English conspiracy theorist, claiming that a Big Pharma whistle-blower had said that “97 percent of corona vaccine recipients will become infertile.” After exposure, the percentage of the study’s respondents who expressed a willingness to take a vaccine dropped more than 6 percentage points.

It might not sound like a lot

But 6% enough to endanger a goal

Dr. Larson has learned that focusing

- on the inaccuracy of any given rumor is to miss the point
- She was asked, Shouldn't people target social media companies and press them to take down the anti-vaccine posts?

Discuss what you think of these statements:

Dr. Larson says,

- “I don’t think taking (misinformation) down is going to get rid of the sentiment. If you shut down Facebook tomorrow, it’s not going to make this go away. It’ll just move.”
- “We don’t have a misinformation problem. We have a trust problem.”

Closing questions

How do you react when you have a problem and someone doesn't address your concerns?

What is something you can do the next time you see someone spreading information that could be false?

You can read more about Dr. Larson
here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/13/health/coronavirus-vaccine-hesitancy-larson.html>

Thank you for your attention!

Any questions?