

**HEALTH  
MATTERS  
FACTS  
MATTER**

*A collaborative initiative of fact-checkers, doctors and  
scientists to counter health misinformation*



[www.firstcheck.in](http://www.firstcheck.in)





*First Check is a verified signatory of the Poynter Institute's International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) Code of Principles*

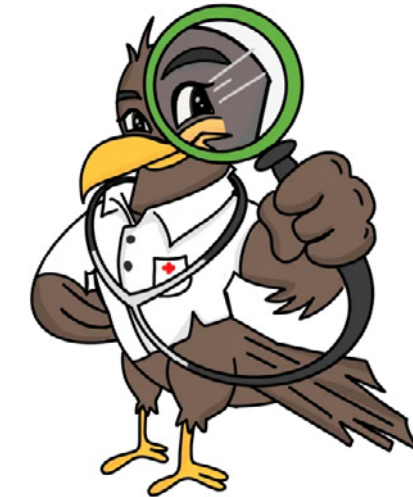
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# HEALTH MATTERS FACTS MATTER

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COMPILED BY: NASEER AHMAD  
EDITED BY: JISHA KRISHNAN

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## DR SABBA MEHMOOD

*Co-founder & Director, First Check*

As a doctor, I have encountered patients who tested my expertise against what they had discovered through Google searches. There are countless instances of patients opting for alternative remedies or unproven therapies based on unscientific, half-baked information, resulting in delayed or ineffective treatment. Whether it is cancer, infertility, diabetes, or COVID-19, we have seen how misinformation can downplay the severity of the health condition, often leading to hurdles in seeking timely medical care.

While health misinformation has long existed, the digital age has amplified its spread. The tech boom and rapid internet penetration has transformed the way people seek health information. Social media has a big impact today on how people make decisions about their health. Rather than consulting qualified medical experts, many turn to online platforms to find solutions.

People often fall victim to misinformation, which can be spread by various sources, including popular online personas, now called social media influencers, who have millions of followers on online platforms. They may propagate false narratives, leading to misconceptions and distrust in science. Misinformation plays a vital role in shaping people's perceptions and decisions.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, has complicated the issue, especially concerning vaccination-related misinformation. Failure to adhere to vaccination schedules can lead to increased susceptibility to diseases, particularly among children.

By addressing vaccine misinformation and promoting immunisation, we can mitigate the burden of vaccine-preventable diseases and safeguard public health.

Trust is a precious commodity and once it is lost, particularly in medical practice, the repercussions can be dangerous. Although truth lies in scientific evidence, it is often overshadowed by sensationalised claims. This makes it critical to address health misinformation, as countless lives are at stake.

Back in 2015, when DataLEADS conducted its maiden bootcamp at my alma mater, Government Medical College Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir, we realised that collaboration is the answer. For the first time, we had a roomful of journalists and doctors spending a day together, deliberating on public health challenges, and making joint efforts to find sustainable solutions.

In 2019, First Check, the flagship health fact-checking initiative of DataLEADS, was conceptualised as a collaborative endeavour to combat the growing global challenge of health misinformation.

The First Check Coffee Table Book chronicles inspiring stories and insights by 20 experts, from diverse fields across the healthcare spectrum, who have volunteered to join us on this mission. We have medical practitioners, public health professionals, academicians, researchers, journalists and fact-checkers from different parts of the world, coming together, to share their learnings so that we can build a healthier and more resilient society.



Social media has a big impact today on how people make decisions about their health. Rather than consulting qualified medical experts, many turn to online platforms to find solutions.”





## JISHA KRISHNAN

*Editor, First Check*

Some of the best ideas originate from everyday conversations. “Why don’t we compile this (First Check monthly newsletter) into a coffee table book?” the boss (aka Syed Nazakat, Founder of DataLEADS) said at one of our weekly meetings a few months ago. It was just a thought then. Soon, the team had refined the concept to include fresh perspectives on health fact-checking by First Check members from across the globe.

What you hold in your hands is a labour of love. Narratives from 20 professionals who are fighting the good fight – against health misinformation, a global public health challenge. From doctors and public health experts to researchers and journalists, here’s a glimpse into their lives, challenges, and aspirations as they navigate an ever-evolving landscape.

Each of these chronicles shines light on how our deeply held personal preferences and social values, shaped by our socio-cultural milieu, play a pivotal role in the health choices we make. It’s not just about making right or wrong choices. There’s more nuance to this conversation.

Health misinformation isn’t just incorrect or misleading information – it’s false information that people spread regardless of whether there is intent to mislead. While some misinformation may be explicitly false, there are several instances of implied misinformation that uses factual information to mislead. We witnessed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, whether it was the vaccination plea or social distancing norms.

At First Check, we strongly believe in the power of collaboration. When we bring together the finest minds across the healthcare spectrum to share their insights and learnings, we can effectively develop strategies for minimising barriers to scientific, credible, actionable, and timely health information. It doesn’t have to be like finding a needle in a haystack, amidst the overload of (often half-baked, fallacious) health information available at our fingertips today!

“You don’t write because you want to say something, you write because you have something to say,” F. Scott Fitzgerald, the celebrated American writer, had aptly said. This book bears testament to that – I hope you find inspiration in these pages.

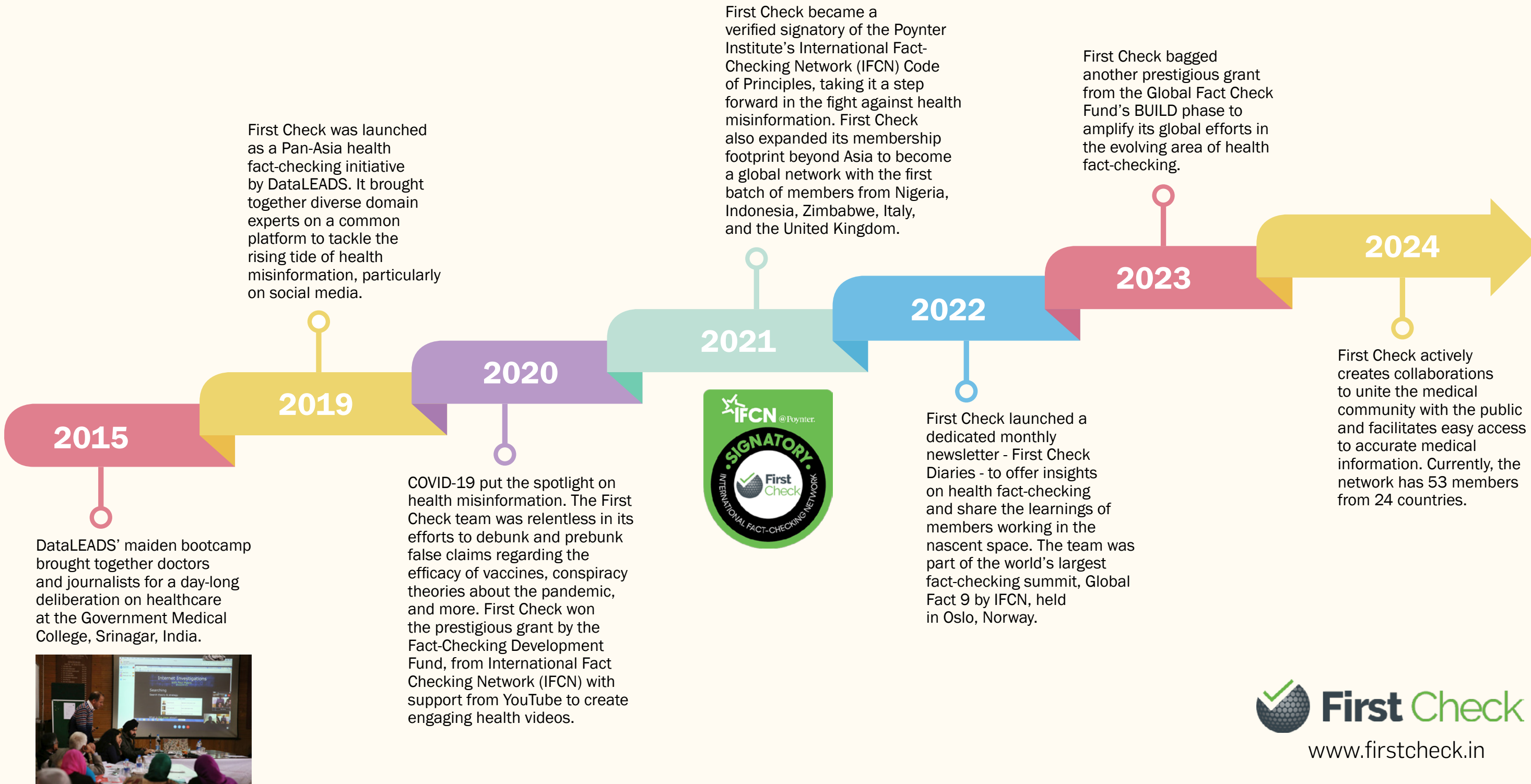


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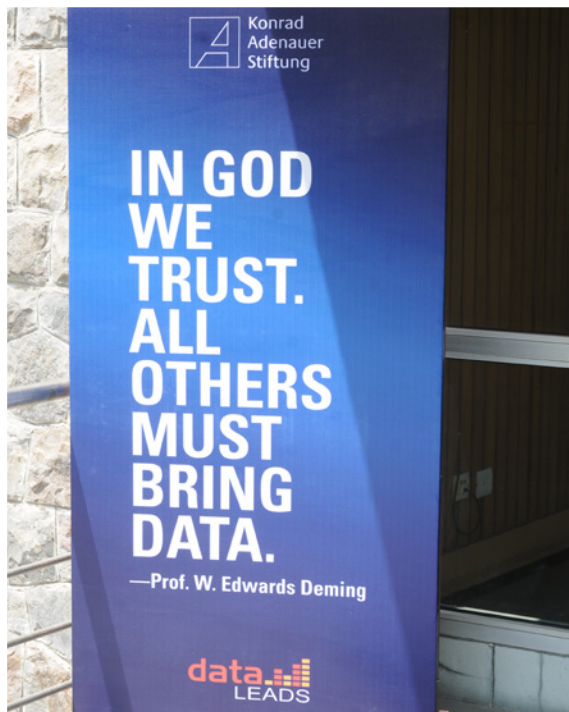
# THE JOURNEY SO FAR...

*First Check has been at the forefront in the fight against health misinformation, powered by its unique global collaboration with doctors, researchers, public health professionals, data scientists, technologists and journalists. Here's how First Check has grown over the years:*

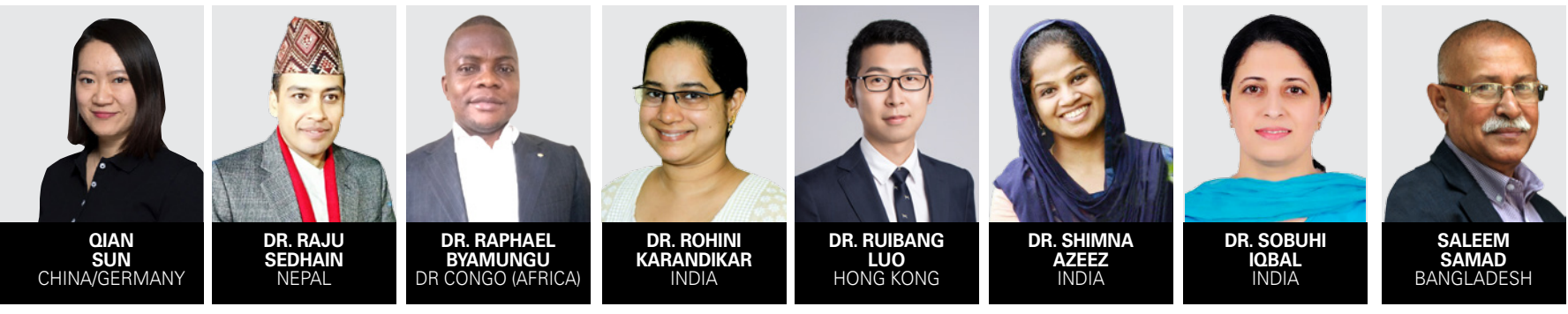




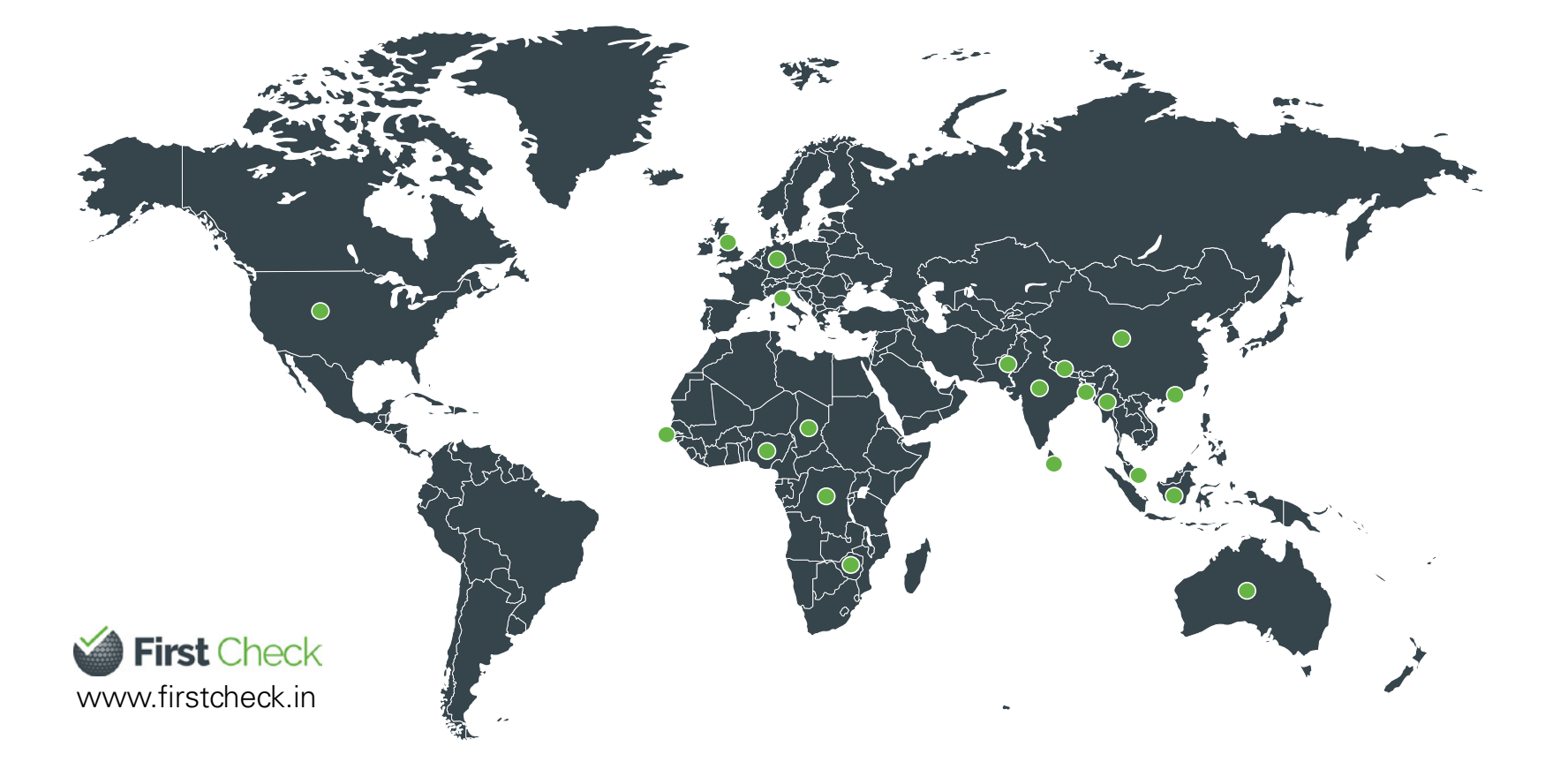
# FIRST CHECK EVENTS







# FIRST CHECK: AN INITIATIVE TO DEBUNK HEALTH MISINFORMATION



 **First Check**  
www.firstcheck.in



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# Insights from First Check Members



“Misinformation, akin to a resilient virus, adapts and spreads rapidly. When it reaches a new environment, like Nigeria, it gains strength, posing a greater challenge.”

**ABARA ERIM**

*Program Coordinator - Health Misinformation  
Management, Nigeria Health Watch*

→ NIGERIA

## ABARA ERIM

*Program Coordinator - Health Misinformation Management, Nigeria Health Watch*

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, Nigeria Health Watch collaborated with the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (NCDC) to embark on a crucial mission to tackle the rampant spread of rumours and misconceptions surrounding the virus. The onslaught of misinformation about the virus, its existence, and even its non-existence posed significant challenges, calling for a proactive and adaptive approach.

As misinformation continued to evolve, so did our strategies. What began as a response to rumours, gradually transformed into a dynamic process of active listening and remote management. Misinformation, akin to a resilient virus, adapts and spreads rapidly. When it reaches a new environment, like Nigeria, it gains strength, posing a greater challenge. Therefore, it's critical to address health misinformation wherever it arises, globally.

Misinformation takes various forms and thrives in times of confusion and uncertainty. To effectively combat its spread, we realised the importance of understanding its origins and motivations. Over the last four years, we have developed a better understanding of the psychology behind misinformation propagation.

Health misinformation knows no boundaries. Just as diseases spread globally, misinformation can

quickly disseminate across borders, amplifying its impact. In today's interconnected world, combatting misinformation requires collective vigilance and proactive engagement.

By building a culture of critical thinking and evidence-based discourse, we can mitigate the harmful effects of misinformation and promote informed decision-making. As epidemic managers and fact-checkers, it's essential for us to unite in our efforts.

We must also collaborate with those who excel in navigating the social media scene. Just like anti-vaxxers who skilfully manipulate online platforms to spread propaganda, we need to mobilise influencers and experts to disseminate accurate information effectively.

In addition to collaboration, investing in research and surveillance is crucial. By gathering and analysing data on misinformation trends, we can refine our strategies and ensure that our interventions are evidence-based and effective.

It's crucial not only to debunk false claims, but also to provide accurate information proactively. By offering credible information, we equip people to discern truth from falsehood and make informed health decisions. While the challenge persists, we're committed to finding innovative ways to combat misinformation, much like fighting viruses and bacteria by developing resistance.



By gathering and analysing data on misinformation trends, we can refine our strategies and ensure that our interventions are evidence-based and effective.”





“Health misinformation often intertwines with cultural and religious perspectives, posing a **unique challenge** for fact-checkers.”

**DR AHMAD FIRDAUS  
MOHD HARIS**

*Co-founder of Medical Mythbusters Malaysia*

→ MALAYSIA

**DR AHMAD FIRDAUS MOHD HARIS***Co-founder of Medical Mythbusters Malaysia*

In our region, one of the major health misinformation issues revolves around the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) attributed to lifestyle choices and the aging population. This has given rise to a proliferation of health products promising instant cure, often without any scientific backing. The misleading claims associated with these products pose a significant threat to public health as individuals may unknowingly expose themselves to potential harm.

A notable challenge in addressing this issue is the ineffectiveness of traditional censorship approaches. Simply restricting the dissemination of information may not be adequate; alternative strategies are needed to combat misinformation at its root. Additionally, the fast-paced nature of information sharing in the digital age makes it difficult to keep up with the constant influx of misleading health claims.

Disseminating evidence-based health information across multiple levels of the community presents considerable challenges. Tailoring messages to reach diverse demographics, including those with varying literacy levels and cultural backgrounds, is essential. This requires innovative communication strategies that can effectively bridge the gap and ensure that accurate health information is accessible and comprehensible to a wide audience.

An all-inclusive approach involving collaboration between health authorities, community leaders, and media outlets is crucial. Empowering the public with critical thinking skills and promoting the importance of seeking evidence-based information can contribute to building a more resilient and informed community in the face of health-related misinformation.

Collaborative efforts with renowned organisations like the World Health Organization, news agencies, and service providers have played a pivotal role in enhancing my understanding of the complex landscape of misinformation. Through targeted training programmes, I've gained valuable insights that have refined my strategies, moving away from a trial-and-error approach to one grounded in evidence-based practices.

This collaborative learning has not only deepened my comprehension of the nuances surrounding health misinformation, but has also equipped me with a more informed and effective toolkit for countering false narratives. The experience of working alongside experts in the field has provided a nuanced perspective that allows for a more precise and impactful response.

However, this journey has also made me acutely aware of the limitations in combatting misinformation. Understanding these constraints has been crucial in setting realistic expectations and refining my focus to areas where I can make the most significant impact.



Simply restricting the dissemination of information may not be adequate; alternative strategies are needed to combat misinformation at its root.”





“Anecdotal evidence masquerades as scientific proof, emotional appeals bypass critical thinking, and cherry-picked data paints a warped picture of reality.”

**DR. AKSHAY JADHAV**

*Pediatrician & clinical director,  
RTWO Healthcare Solutions*

→ INDIA

**DR AKSHAY JADHAV***Pediatrician & clinical director, RTWO Healthcare Solutions*

**H**ealth misinformation, as I see it, is a tangled web of false or misleading information about health topics, presented as fact. It can range from inaccurate claims about miracle cures to distorted views on vaccines and public health measures. Unlike harmless misunderstandings, health misinformation thrives on the potential to harm individuals and communities by swaying health decisions and eroding trust in legitimate sources.

This web is spun from various threads. Anecdotal evidence masquerades as scientific proof, emotional appeals bypass critical thinking, and cherry-picked data paints a warped picture of reality. Social media algorithms, designed to keep us engaged, often amplify these narratives, creating echo chambers where misinformation festers unchecked.

The consequences of this web are far-reaching. Delayed diagnoses, ineffective treatments, and vaccine hesitancy are just some of the potential harms. The COVID-19 pandemic starkly highlighted the dangers, with misinformation fuelling vaccine resistance and undermining public health efforts.

So, how can we untangle this web and protect

ourselves? First, become a critical consumer of information. Check the source: Is it a reputable organisation with expertise in the field? Look for evidence: Does the information cite credible sources like scientific studies? It's prudent to be wary of emotional appeals and sensationalised headlines.

Second, utilise resources like fact-checking websites (such as First Check) and reliable news outlets. Share fact-checked information responsibly, without amplifying the misinformation itself.

Third, seek diverse perspectives, even if you disagree with them. Don't rely solely on social media feeds. Consult with healthcare professionals before making any health decisions.

And finally, advocate for change. It's important to hold social media platforms accountable for content moderation. We need to support educational initiatives that promote critical thinking skills.

Remember, tackling health misinformation is a collective effort. By being informed, discerning, and actively seeking reliable information, we can all contribute to unravelling this web and building a healthier online space for everyone.



It's important to hold social media platforms accountable for content moderation. We need to support educational initiatives that promote critical thinking skills."





“Without a robust commitment from both governmental and societal stakeholders, alongside clear and sustainable financing, this mission faces significant hurdles.”

**DR ANNICK MONDJO**

*Director of the Infectious Diseases Programme,  
Gabon Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Africa*

→ AFRICA

## DR ANNICK MONDJO

*Director of the Infectious Diseases Programme,  
Gabon Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Africa*

**H**ealth misinformation has undergone a seismic shift since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. False narratives surrounding vaccines have proliferated in our region, perpetuating vaccine hesitancy, even as the immediate fear of the infection waned. Consequently, the impact has extended beyond the pandemic, affecting routine immunisation efforts, as evidenced by the presence of unvaccinated children – not just in remote areas, but even in the capital city of Libreville.

Journalists have been vocal about the obstacles in accessing accurate information during disease outbreaks, with official channels often constrained by political considerations. Most media outlets also lack the requisite health literacy to combat mis/disinformation effectively. There still exists a glaring deficiency in training initiatives addressing infodemic management, despite its critical importance in safeguarding public health.

Engaging experts to combat health misinformation is a great initiative, though fraught with challenges. Without a robust commitment from both governmental and societal stakeholders, alongside clear and sustainable financing, this mission faces significant hurdles.

As a medical professional specialising in public health and infodemic management, I strongly recommend the integration of infodemic response strategies into outbreak preparedness plans and vaccination campaigns, such as those targeting malaria and cervical cancer.

I also believe that proactive measures, such as prebunking interventions from early childhood education through university, are essential to inoculate individuals against misinformation. Finally, collaboration between healthcare workers and media professionals is paramount in promoting an effective approach to combatting misinformation and spreading public health literacy.



There still exists a glaring deficiency in training initiatives addressing infodemic management, despite its critical importance in safeguarding public health.”





“We need to educate and sensitise healthcare professionals. Continuing education through digital platforms can help healthcare professionals to critically evaluate information and discern credible sources.”

**DR APURVAKUMAR PANDYA**

*Psychologist and Assistant Professor at the  
Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar*

→ INDIA

**DR APURVAKUMAR PANDYA***Psychologist and Assistant Professor at the Indian Institute of Public Health, Gandhinagar*

**A**s a social and behavioural scientist, I have been intricately involved in the battle against health misinformation. In the digital age, where information spreads rapidly and often unchecked, the epidemic of misinformation has become a public health concern.

Health misinformation encompasses a wide array of false or misleading information related to health and well-being. From misleading claims about miracle cures to distorted interpretations of scientific research, misinformation poses a significant threat to public health. In India, where diverse cultural beliefs and linguistic diversity intersect with rapid digital expansion, the challenge of combatting health misinformation is particularly profound.

As a dedicated member of First Check, I have gained essential insights into the obstacles we confront and the tactics needed to promote correct health information. While social media platforms amplify the dissemination of misinformation, cultural beliefs and socio-economic factors can shape individuals' susceptibility to misinformation. It warrants tailored communication strategies, which can be leveraged by multipronged methods.

With the use of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and behavioural insights, we can develop targeted interventions to counter misinformation effectively.

Moreover, fostering partnerships with community leaders, healthcare providers, and digital platforms can enhance the reach and impact of our efforts. By promoting healthy discourses, building trust, and actively involving communities in the co-creation of health messaging, we can cultivate a sense of ownership and accountability. Empowering communities to become agents of change not only amplifies the reach of our efforts, but also fosters sustainable behaviour change.

We need to educate and sensitise healthcare professionals too.

Continuing education through digital platforms can greatly help healthcare professionals to critically evaluate information and discern credible sources. At the same time, integrating strategies to combat misinformation in school as well as health and allied healthcare educational curriculum would be an important step. By promoting health literacy from an early age, we can cultivate a generation that is empowered to distinguish fact from fiction. A generation that can make informed health decisions.

With the collective expertise and the power of technology, we can pave the way for a future where accurate health information prevails. As we continue to navigate the landscape of misinformation, let us remain steadfast in our commitment to truth, transparency, and the promotion of public health.



With the use of artificial intelligence, data analytics, and behavioural insights, we can develop targeted interventions to counter misinformation effectively.”





“I encourage PhD scholars to delve deeper into the health misinformation dynamics and **find solutions to combat it,** with the support of suitable funding agencies.”

**DR ARULCHELVAN SRIRAM**

*Professor and Head, Department of  
Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai*

→ INDIA

**DR ARULCHELVAN SRIRAM***Professor and Head, Department of Media Sciences,  
Anna University, Chennai*

**H**ave you heard the popular folktale about Akbar and Birbal, the Mughal emperor and his ingenious advisor, that beautifully captures the human tendency to give (often useless, sometimes harmful) health-related advice? Birbal solicited opinions from onlookers as he stood at a crossroad with a bandaged hand. By noon, he had a long list of advisors, with Akbar's name right at the top. The witty story exemplifies the prevalence of health misinformation, long before the advent of social media.

However, with social media and easy access to the internet, the rate at which false health information spreads has accelerated. The search for health information and guidance is often prompted by the rising costs of contemporary medical procedures. This commonly leads to unsupported advice and health misinformation that can cause more harm. The urge to save money or seek a miracle cure can result in severe losses in terms of finances as well as health.

Strong intervention is necessary to combat this public health challenge. It is critical to create a culture

that encourages people not to share or pay heed to ambiguous/unscientific health advice. We need media literacy that can drive social and behaviour change. Each one of us should take a pledge to support evidence-based health information. It can be a matter of life and death, wherein making informed decisions is crucial.

As a journalism educator and media literacy researcher, I come across numerous unverified health stories/claims in different media, including social media channels. It has prompted me to do serious research in the area of health misinformation. Today, I encourage my PhD scholars to delve deeper into the health misinformation dynamics and find solutions to combat it, with the support of suitable funding agencies. We are exploring more research opportunities at the international level.

Becoming a member of First Check has introduced me to greater resources and a treasure trove of expert ideas from across the globe. It is a powerful initiative to advocate evidence-based practices to battle health misinformation.



We need media literacy that can drive social and behaviour change. Each one of us should take a pledge to support evidence-based health information.”





“I strongly recommend organisational and social support for those fighting this important battle against health mis/disinformation.”

**DR CAIT MCMAHON OAM**

*Psychologist, media and mental health specialist,  
and founder of Cait McMahon Consulting (CMC)*

→ AUSTRALIA

## DR CAIT MCMAHON OAM

*Psychologist, media and mental health specialist,  
and founder of Cait McMahon Consulting (CMC)*

The role of fact-checkers has become increasingly important in today's day and age. While we know of the crucial work they do, we seldom comprehend the mental health toll of doing this job. There is moral distress and potentially moral injury experienced by many professionals in this challenging role.

Fact-checkers have reported that they struggle significantly while dealing with deliberate disinformation on a constant basis in the cyberspace. It is overwhelming, particularly when they know the potential impact this disinformation can have on people. Also, many fact checkers work from home and this poses significant challenges in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

As a mental health professional who works closely with journalists and fact-checkers, I strongly recommend organisational and social support for those fighting this important battle against health mis/disinformation. We need to acknowledge their work and show gratitude for their contribution to public health.

I believe that collaboration between media professionals and health experts to counter health misinformation can save humanity. It is essential to democracy and societies at large. Access to accurate health information is an important right as individuals and communities can only take action for themselves if they are presented with the truth.

Health experts can analyse data and present accurate information to the media for dissemination and to inform the public. But what constitutes 'the media'? Traditional, legacy media is one avenue, although today our society is taking media into its own hands through social media.

Since the onset of COVID-19, we have seen the media act in good and bad ways - promoting facts, but also peddling mis/disinformation. There must be a call back to information that is of public interest, that abides by an ethical standard. This is a complex and important discussion. And we must continue to have it, with all stakeholders.



Fact-checkers have reported that they struggle significantly while dealing with deliberate disinformation on a constant basis in the cyberspace.”





“Only accredited digital healthcare platforms with medicos on the panel should be allowed to publish health information.”

**DR CHANDRIKA KAMBAM**

*Medical Advisor, Even Healthcare, India*

→ INDIA

**DR CHANDRIKA KAMBAM***Medical Advisor, Even Healthcare, India*

I have witnessed the healthcare industry's transition from offline, physical information to digitisation. The evolution has, no doubt, broadened our horizons and improved access to healthcare. However, just like everything in life, this too has a downside – infodemics. An epidemic of health information, including mis/disinformation, spreading like wildfire.

This epidemic undermines and erodes public confidence in healthcare information. With time, the mistrust continues to grow. There's another (equally disheartening) side to this story: Patients become overconfident about self-medications and routines that they may have seen online. Apart from the risk of wrong treatments and harmful practices – thanks to the endless reels and social media videos on home remedies – there are unnecessary delays in the prescribed treatment plan.

I strongly believe that only licensed healthcare professionals should be allowed to post health-related information online. Similarly, accredited digital healthcare platforms with medicos on the panel should be allowed to publish health information. Healthcare providers and online platforms must have regulations on false health claims and

misinformation, with governmental support.

My experience in integrating technology with healthcare has opened new avenues for combatting infodemics. Digital therapeutics, comprising online apps, can help manage patient health issues in a customised manner. The data you share with them is end-to-end encrypted and analysed by registered doctors, dentists, therapists, trainers, and dieticians. Hence, the medical advice given is authentic.

While telehealth services were instrumental in ensuring access to healthcare during the COVID-19 pandemic, it's important to recognise its untapped potential for a country like India. Remote consultations can significantly improve access to reliable healthcare resources. Just like artificial intelligence (AI) can help detect and flag health misinformation, courtesy its ability to read large datasets.

Although technology is powerful, there is no substitute for skilled media professionals who are passionate about conveying evidence-based health information. We need to encourage responsible health reporting, powered by fact-checking and robust research, in order to empower individuals and communities to make informed health decisions.



Although technology is powerful, there is no substitute for skilled media professionals who are passionate about conveying evidence-based health information.”





“Mental health has unfortunately been clouded with stigma, prejudice and stereotypes, especially in the low-and-middle-income countries.”

**DR DEBANJAN BANERJEE**

*Consultant Geriatric Psychiatrist,  
Apollo Multispecialty Hospitals, Kolkata*

→ INDIA

**DR DEBANJAN BANERJEE***Consultant Geriatric Psychiatrist,  
Apollo Multispecialty Hospitals, Kolkata*

I believe that every physician is inherently a fact-checker, even though we often remain unaware of it. Not taught in routine medical curriculum, not evaluated in clinical examinations and not popularised in regular medical discourse – medical fact-checking counters misinformation, one of the most dangerous threats to public health.

Educating a person about his/her illness, correcting the medical facts, helping the individuals and their families to develop a ‘true and unbiased’ outlook towards their health condition, forms an integral component of treatment, though often neglected. Instant communication and social media have made it easier than ever for people to get in touch with each other, regardless of time or place. While this is incredibly useful for a multitude of reasons, it has also created the perfect breeding ground for misinformation to spread like wildfire.

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequent digitalisation of our lives as a part of the “new normal” have further fuelled this fire. Most of us may not remember a single day since the beginning of 2020 that we did not come across an apparently ‘informative’ forward about the pandemic, which was indeed untrue.

Before joining First Check, I was a silent fact-checker, unaware of my roles and implications my fact-checking has for healthcare. I started collaborating with a multi-disciplinary team comprising journalists, physicians, public health experts, health administrators, community workers, and an enthusiastic group of organisers dedicated to the cause of medical fact-checking. This made me realise how potentially damaging health misinformation and disinformation can really be and the various dimensions in which fact-checking can help health and social care.

This has special relevance to me as a psychiatrist. Mental health has unfortunately been clouded with stigma, prejudice and stereotypes, especially in the low-and-middle-income countries. Help-seeking is reduced, and emotional concerns are minimalised based on numerous myths and hearsays about mental wellbeing and mental health conditions.

Working with First Check has made me realise that fact-checking can be used as an effective preventive and promotive tool for psychological health. It is not an easy job, but a dedicated team can make the work effective and enjoyable. Salute to all fact-checkers – you make information count!



Working with First Check has made me realise that fact-checking can be used as an effective preventive and promotive tool for psychological health.”





“Companies engaged in promoting unverified health products may view fact-checkers as obstacles to their business goals. **This can lead to legal threats and lawsuits.**”

JOHN ALOYZEUS REOTUTAR

*Biologist & writer*

→ PHILIPPINES

**JOHN ALOYZEUS REOTUTAR***Biologist & writer*

**I**n the Philippines, misinformation runs rampant, from dubious medical claims about cancer to unfounded conspiracy theories, especially exacerbated by the pandemic. As a fact-checker addressing medical misinformation, I see that the landscape poses unique challenges. Fact-checkers, especially those focused on health, often encounter resistance and accusations when debunking false claims promoted by companies peddling questionable health products. This backlash stems from a complex interplay of commercial interests and public perception.

Companies engaged in promoting unverified health products may view fact-checkers as obstacles to their business goals. This can lead to legal threats and lawsuits, creating a challenging environment for those striving to uphold accuracy and public well-being.

In my region, there are three major health misinformation issues. First, the promotion of unverified medical products by celebrities and influencers. This trend can mislead the public, as individuals may be swayed by the influence of well-known figures, leading to the potential use of ineffective or unsafe products. Fact-checking plays a crucial role in debunking these claims and providing accurate information to protect public health.

Second, health-related scams leveraging artificial intelligence (AI) have become prevalent. Misleading claims about AI-driven medical solutions or treatments can exploit people's trust in cutting-edge technology. Fact-checkers need to scrutinise these claims, ensuring that the

public is well-informed about the actual capabilities and limitations of AI in the health sector.

Another significant problem involves misinformation surrounding alternative health practices. Unverified claims about unconventional treatments or remedies are gaining traction, potentially leading individuals to forego evidence-based medical interventions. Fact-checkers work to dispel myths surrounding alternative health practices and promote a balanced understanding of their efficacy and safety.

At First Check, I've witnessed benefits of the collaboration between media professionals and health experts in tackling health misinformation. Media professionals, armed with their storytelling skills, ensure that information reaches the public accurately and comprehensively. On the other hand, health experts provide the necessary depth and context to ensure the nuances of medical information are accurately conveyed. The joint efforts often lead to the development of educational campaigns and resources designed to address specific health myths and misconceptions.

Over the past few years, we have seen media outlets, fact-checking organisations, and public health authorities intensify their efforts to debunk false claims and promote accurate information. There has also been a growing awareness among the public about the importance of verifying information from reliable sources, contributing to a more informed and discerning audience. These are encouraging steps in the right direction.



Unverified claims about unconventional treatments or remedies are gaining traction, potentially leading individuals to forego evidence-based medical interventions.”





“The key lies in establishing a ‘verified digital ecosystem’ where every social media post undergoes scrutiny before publication.”

**DR MAULIK PATEL**

*Consultant physician*

→ INDIA

**DR MAULIK PATEL***Consultant physician*

**I**n the era of social media, we are constantly bombarded with information, which if not interpreted correctly can lead to disastrous consequences, as we have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the right health information can help us to make sound choices, misinformation and disinformation lead to confusion, harassment, and harmful health consequences.

As a healthcare professional, who has to deal with the impact of health mis/disinformation on a day-to-day basis, I believe that the best way to deal with this public health challenge is to create a 'verified digital ecosystem' where every post is analysed and verified as safe or unsafe before it is

published on any social media channels.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) can play a crucial role in making this a reality. Governments and the private sector need to work together in this global effort to create efficient tools and guidelines in order to cultivate a healthier information ecosystem.

It's also important to invest in regular trainings and awareness programmes. I believe that all universities should have dedicated courses on battling mis/disinformation as part of their curriculum. That's the most efficient and sustainable way to build long-term resilience and win the battle against health mis/disinformation.



Governments and the private sector need to work together in this global effort to create efficient tools and guidelines to cultivate a healthier information ecosystem.”





“While social media influencers have the choice to share **personal experiences** and open up conversations about medical conditions, they must act more responsibly.”

**PRATIBHA**

*Fact-checker, First Check*

→ INDIA

**PRATIBHA***Fact-checker, First Check*

**W**e have become more adept at understanding how health misinformation spreads today. COVID-19 was, perhaps, the first time when most people witnessed – in real time – how complex and time-consuming medical research can be. However, because we did not have the power or the requisite information to fight the virus, most of us were quick to fall for any kind of information that was put before us, without first verifying it. Soon, both the medical and media industries became acutely aware of the cost and gravity of leaving the information vacuum open for unreliable sources to fill.

One of the biggest challenges that we face as health fact-checkers is science denialism. We often deal with the rejection of scientific evidence on important issues, such as vaccines, based on conspiracy theories and opinions of fake experts. People are unwilling to

trust research-based evidence because of numerous reasons. There's lack of trust in the medical fraternity; sometimes, it's just the convenience and cost-effectiveness of opting for home remedies.

Social media influencers pose another key challenge in our fight against health misinformation. While influencers have the choice to share personal experiences and open up conversations about medical conditions, they must act more responsibly. With great power comes great responsibility. It's important to recognise the power they hold over a largely uninformed audience, particularly when it comes to health decisions that can be a matter of life and death.

Fact-checking is essential. It's important to note that not all health advice is equal. Cookie-cutter health solutions, without professional diagnosis from qualified healthcare practitioners, are a recipe for disaster.



One of the biggest challenges that we face as health fact-checkers is science denialism... the rejection of scientific evidence on important issues.”





“By combining the reach of social media with the power of traditional media, we can create maximum impact.”

**QIAN SUN**

*Independent journalist*

→ CHINA/GERMANY

**QIAN SUN**

*Independent journalist*

**W**hen the COVID-19 pandemic started to spread from China to different parts of the world, I was on a holiday in India. Coincidentally, I connected with the DataLEADS team, abandoned my holiday plans, and joined First Check to do some in-depth reporting on the evolving situation in China.

Beyond being a public health problem, COVID-19 soon revealed its political dimensions. It became more than just a health concern; it emerged as one of the biggest geopolitical subjects of our time.

Actually, that's true of all public health stories. There's more than one dimension to these pressing issues. As a Chinese journalist (now based in Germany), I had the opportunity to collaborate with an American journalist friend based in Kenya, sparking the idea of a cross-border project. We decided to work on a public health issue that was relevant to Europe, Kenya, and China. Malaria emerged as a common denominator across these regions, prompting us to dig deeper into its dynamics.

Our investigation revealed the multifaceted involvement of China, European pharmaceutical

companies, and international organisations in combatting malaria. Despite scientific progress, the disease continues to pose a significant challenge in Africa. We found that Kenya serves as a conduit for numerous medicines, while many of them, particularly generic drugs, originate from India and China. However, it's the European companies that were predominantly reaping the financial benefits.

Coming back to the pandemic, health misinformation was a big challenge that we had to encounter. Particularly, the deluge of unverified information on social media platforms. As journalists, we pondered about the ways in which we can deliver verified, scientific health information to maximum number of people. How can we talk to each other, without being stuck in our echo chambers?

Based on my experience, I believe that by combining the reach of social media with the power of traditional media, we can create maximum impact. Collaboration can work wonders. In terms of addressing global health challenges, we have seen journalists from diverse backgrounds come together and do incredible work.



Beyond being a public health problem, COVID-19 soon revealed its political dimensions...it emerged as one of the biggest geopolitical subjects of our time.”





“What’s intriguing is the discrepancy between the actual prevalence of misinformation and the level of concern it generates in different regions.”

**DR SAFIEH SHAH**

*Senior policy scientist and epidemiologist*

→ PAKISTAN/ CANADA

**DR SAFIEH SHAH***Senior policy scientist and epidemiologist*

**I**t's fascinating to see how online communities are coming together, supporting each other across distances and time zones, and shaping the future. It has made me realise how important it is for media professionals and health experts to work together, especially when it comes to fighting health misinformation.

I've seen this collaboration in action with First Check: health experts provide accurate information just when it's needed, and media professionals step in to make sure this information is easy to understand and engaging. They can amplify this information on different platforms, making sure it reaches as many people as possible.

Based on my observations across various countries, it's evident that misinformation poses a global challenge. However, what's intriguing is the discrepancy between the actual prevalence of misinformation and the level of concern it generates in different regions. For instance, in South Asia, misinformation proliferates widely, yet there seems to be a comparatively lower level of concern among the people compared to regions like America and Canada. Despite the significant impact misinformation has had in recent times, the apparent lack of concern makes it necessary to strengthen mass awareness campaigns.

In South Asia, the spread of false information online is a critical concern. Across various social media

platforms, misinformation spreads among diverse groups and identities, including different age and religious groups. The repercussions are devastating: such misinformation distorts scientific truths creating a climate of fear and panic. This proved detrimental during the pandemic, eroding trust in healthcare services, leading to vaccine hesitancy, and the adoption of unverified treatments.

In Canada, misinformation primarily revolves around scams, which historically targeted financial matters, but have now shifted towards exploiting health concerns. These scams include deceitful promises of prevention and treatment, extending to fraudulent communications advising COVID patients to forgo quarantine measures. It has undermined the trust in public health systems, culminating in instances of verbal abuse and threats directed at healthcare workers. The spread of conspiracy theories, particularly regarding vaccination is posing a significant challenge to public health efforts worldwide.

Regular monitoring and updated research are necessary to keep abreast of the current state of health misinformation on social media. Localised studies are also needed to determine regional variations in the prevalence of health misinformation on social media. Finally, we need to adopt a whole-of-society approach and prevent any groups of society from being marginalised, persecuted, stigmatised, blamed, shamed, or excluded from combatting the enemy: health misinformation.



Regular monitoring and updated research are necessary to keep abreast of the current state of health misinformation on social media.”





“It’s important to acknowledge that healthcare officials in **most developing countries** are overworked and lack the technical capacity to counteract health misinformation.”

**DR SAMEERA RANASINGHE**

*Doctor in Community Medicine at the  
Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka*

→ SRI LANKA

## DR SAMEERA RANASINGHE

*Doctor in Community Medicine at the Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka*

**M**isinformation has been a paramount issue in the health sector globally. Yet, up until the onset of COVID-19, this “sleeping snake” had not raised much concerns about its noticeable impact. However, during the pandemic, social media was at its peak capacity, with people from different walks of life engaging as pros. Also, COVID-19 provided a perfect opening for massive misinformation flow due to the ignorance of the health agencies about the disease.

Social media was where information was available. The inability of health officials to engage in fact-checking at that time, largely due to ignorance and lack of training, led to waves of misinformation. Eventually, training in infodemic management has equipped the health systems to counter this information tsunami – to some extent. However, the battle is far from over.

Not only in Sri Lanka, but in most developing countries, fact-checkers face challenges from the traditional health system as well as the public. During the COVID-19 vaccine campaigns, we found that the source of vaccine misinformation was often medical doctors with little awareness of scientific evidence.

Similarly, the non-digital nature of misinformation flow in developing countries tends to produce complexities in debunking those unscientific claims. That apart, at the governance level, low priority is given to infodemic management, making it

difficult for voluntary fact-checkers to fight against health misinformation.

The major health information issue in Sri Lanka is the lack of a centralised control mechanism for infodemic management. The centralised bodies for health promotion have started important work like social listening and debunking myths through social media. Yet, these have not reached the general public, and they are not addressing the issues at the local level, mainly offline.

Being a country with rich cultural influence, myths and false health information are common even among the literate public in Sri Lanka. Misinformation is particularly rampant about stigmatised health issues like sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and malnutrition, a pressing problem faced by the country.

It’s important to acknowledge that healthcare officials in most developing countries are overworked and lack the technical capacity to counteract health misinformation. Furthermore, there is a budgetary restriction to expand healthcare expenses to cover infodemic management.

In my experience, collaboration between the media and the healthcare workforces can form the much-needed bridge to help navigate these challenges. However, the collaboration needs to be well thought out, stringently laying down the responsibilities of each sector.



During the COVID-19 vaccine campaigns, we found that the source of misinformation was often medical doctors with little awareness of scientific evidence.”





“GPs have a crucial role to play as the first-line of **healthcare professionals** that patients encounter in primary healthcare facilities.”

**DR SITI FATIMAH**

*General practitioner*

→ INDONESIA

## DR SITI FATIMAH

*General practitioner*

I tell my patients to be wary of health claims that seem too good to be true, such as those that promise miraculous results in no time. It is equally important to be cautious of health myths and folklores that we are surrounded by in our communities. In my clinic, patients often talk about joint problems caused by showering at night, or weight gain due to consumption of cold water. Another common misconception is that “natural” herbal medicines are safer than drugs that have undergone rigorous clinical trials.

Over the years, I have seen an unprecedented rise in health misinformation, particularly when it comes to vaccinations. There is an urgent need to promote health literacy and critical thinking skills to help people find reliable sources of health information.

In my opinion, general practitioners (GPs) have a crucial role to play as the first-line of healthcare professionals that patients encounter in primary healthcare facilities. It is the doctor’s responsibility to

provide trusted and accurate information, supported by the most up-to-date, evidence-based medicine, while also addressing any misconceptions or myths that may be prevailing in society.

To ensure that patients can comprehend the information provided, doctors should use simple language and tools, such as visual comparisons or explanatory videos and images, to explain complex medical terms. It is important to encourage patients to ask questions or discuss reliable sources of health information. These measures can enhance patient knowledge and critical thinking, enabling people to make informed health decisions.

That way, people won’t believe everything they see on social media. They will be ready to verify the credibility of the information by cross-checking it with multiple reliable sources before sharing it with others. Our health information ecosystem needs to get stronger in order to prevent misinformation and misunderstanding among the public.



There is an urgent need to promote health literacy and critical thinking skills to help people find reliable sources of health information.”



“In many ways, since people have become more health-conscious after the pandemic, health **misinformation peddlers** have a larger target audience today.”

**TEJ KUMAR**

*Fact-checker and Researcher, First Check*



→ INDIA

**TEJ KUMAR***Fact-checker and Researcher, First Check*

**M**any years ago, when my mother found out that she had liver and kidney dysfunction, her instinct was to protect her family from the pain and agony. She sought solace in pseudo-scientific practices, half-baked diets, and dubious medicines. What killed her was not the illness, but the lies peddled by those who make a living out of people's anguish.

Health misinformation never dies; it persists indefinitely. In the post-COVID era, the prevalence of dangerous remedies for the infection may have diminished, but we still see new trends emerge in misinformation, particularly regarding vaccines, nutrition and healthy lifestyle choices. For instance, some social media influencers claim that oats consumption is toxic, while others suggest that fasting for several days is the best way to lose weight. And it's not just COVID vaccines that are dangerous, but all vaccines are harmful to humans, warn the anti-vaxxers.

WhatsApp is often the first platform in India to spread health misinformation rapidly, followed by Facebook. YouTube and Instagram, on the other hand, tend to promote more food-related misinformation.

In many ways, since people have become more health-conscious after the pandemic, health misinformation peddlers have a larger target audience today. In

today's day and age, people seem to have accepted misinformation via WhatsApp forwards and social media posts as a way of life. As one of my techie friends puts it, "When people consume too much information, misinformation is inevitable". Another friend put it more poetically – "When we open the windows for some fresh air, some dust is bound to come in too".

In the past, people sought health information from trusted sources, such as doctors, medical experts, or even spiritual gurus. However, in today's digital age, social media influencers have the largest following! These influencers often prioritise gaining more views over providing accurate health information, making it challenging for fact-checkers to combat misinformation effectively.

Addressing this widespread misinformation demands two things – enhancing public health literacy and reducing the costs of medical treatment. High medical costs are the key reason for many hapless people opting for alternative or unverified therapies, based on health misinformation.

As a health fact-checker, my aspiration is to foster a society free of misinformation. However, I've come to realise that achieving this goal is not going to happen anytime soon – but that can't deter us from doing our job.

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High medical costs are the key reason for many hapless people opting for unverified therapies, based on health misinformation.”



“Just like fire can be used for constructive purposes as well as destructive purposes, social media **can be a powerful tool** for spreading information as well as mis/disinformation.”

**TRACEY NOMATTER RUZENGWE**

*Health Promotion Practitioner,  
Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe*



→ ZIMBABWE

## TRACEY NOMATTER RUZENGWE

*Health Promotion Practitioner,  
Ministry of Health and Child Care, Zimbabwe*

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by science and the way it explains the functioning of the human body. During my high school days, I had a keen interest in biology, which helped me score A grades, both at ordinary and advanced levels. Later, this passion influenced my choice of career in health sciences.

Today, as a health promotion practitioner, my duties include demand generation for various health programmes. In executing this, I encounter numerous health-related myths and misconceptions, which I have to dispel and also help build the capacity of grassroots-level cadres to do the same.

The COVID-19 vaccination programme is a telling example of the daunting task. Since it was a novel condition, there was limited knowledge about it and information kept evolving as research availed more answers. This led to abundant misinformation – which I am glad to have fought, and am still fighting. Up to this day, we have people who are eligible for the vaccine, yet

they are reluctant to get vaccinated due to widespread misinformation about COVID vaccines. This shows the alarming impact of health misinformation.

I often wonder whether social media is a blessing or a bane. I think it depends on how we use it. Just like fire can be used for constructive purposes as well as destructive purposes, social media can be a powerful tool for spreading information as well as mis/disinformation.

In today's digital age, we are seeing the irreparable damage caused by social media. The speed at which (mis)information can reach multitudes is unbelievable! So, we need to be cautious of what we share on digital platforms (as well as in in-person communications). I have found the acronym S.H.A.R.E to be a helpful guide in deciding whether to share information which I encounter on social media. It stands for: check the Source; Headlines do not always tell the full story; Analyse the facts; images and videos could be Retouched; look out for Errors.

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We are seeing the irreparable damage caused by social media. The speed at which (mis) information can reach multitudes is unbelievable!”





“Educators in universities can collaborate with **media organisations** to build fact-checking teams.”

**WALTER BALANE**

*Associate Professor, Department of Development  
Communication, Bukidnon State University, Philippines*

→ PHILIPPINES

**WALTER BALANE***Associate Professor, Department of Development Communication,  
Bukidnon State University, Philippines*

**A** lot has changed since I started my fact-checking journey in 2019. Today, we have health experts who are media savvy as well as media professionals who have health education backgrounds. This is a good sign, opening new doors for positive possibilities.

In our Radio Program called Share to Heal (*Pagambitay daw ag Kaulian*) at the Bukidnon State University, the academe and the media see the interaction with health professionals as a strategic endeavour. While we seek to counter misinformation on specific health and development issues, the programme also tells audiences that they can use fact-checking to address some of their personal issues, which often times media cannot cover.

It's no longer just media practitioners who do fact-checking work. There are inspiring initiatives, especially in communities, to promote fact-checking by citizens. I am a part of one such effort. Our volunteer group is working on capacity-building efforts with grassroots communities, including youths of a tribal community at the foot of Mt. Kitanglad Range Natural Park, a protected area and the ancestral domain of the indigenous peoples in the area. The indigenous peoples have become vulnerable to both natural and man-made hazards, like misinformation.

Given the pervasiveness of misinformation, I believe

that all fact-checkers need to work together. The fact of the matter is that media organisations today are highly challenged with economic issues, low public trust, and the dwindling size of newsrooms, if they have not folded up already.

Professionals with more resources should own up the job of fact-checking. For example, educators in universities can collaborate with media organisations to build fact-checking teams. In terms of health fact checking, health agencies in the national and local levels need to transform their information units into active fact-checking teams. It is important to ensure that the Department of Health trains its staff to become fact-checkers, or at least be at the forefront of fact-checking initiatives to inspire more healthcare professionals join this fight.

There is an urgent need to conduct systemic and sectoral communication planning, which I think is lacking in most fact-checking initiatives. Piecemeal efforts are not enough; we need to understand and address the root cause of prevailing misinformation/disinformation. We also need to look at its supply and demand (producers and consumers) and how the regulation/control and support for counter action can address this effectively. We need policies to deter producers by way of punishment or putting up barriers to entry in order to address the supply side.



It's no longer just media practitioners who do fact-checking work. There are inspiring initiatives, especially in communities, to promote fact-checking by citizens."





“It’s not good enough to know that you know the facts, you need to step up and set the record straight. **Debunking false claims, particularly about health, is vital.**”

**ZAYED ABOALI**

*National emergency nurse with the  
United Nations Development Programme*

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→ YEMEN

## ZAYED ABOALI

*National emergency nurse with the United Nations Development Programme*

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Given the world that we live in today, fact-checking is more important than ever before. If you see a social media post or blog that claims “vaccines cause autism”, it is important to verify the claim and then, call out the false information. It’s not good enough to know that you know the facts, you need to step up and set the record straight. Debunking false claims, particularly about health, is vital.

We need to ask the right questions: Is the information coming from a trusted source? Is it backed by scientific evidence? Research shows that fact-checking corrects perceptions among people as well as discourages them from spreading false or misleading claims.

As part of our fact-checking efforts, it is important to talk about the cognitive biases that are innate to each of us. While these biases help us navigate everyday life, they can cause us to overlook relevant facts, even when they are clearly presented. We need to find effective ways to address this challenge.

It is also important to know and understand the kind of information that patients and people, in general, are looking for. As healthcare professionals, we need to be willing and available to answer their questions about viral health claims on social media as well as popular health myths passed down from generation to generation.



It is important to know and understand the kind of information that patients and people, in general, are looking for.”







