

Fake medical news – how can we fight it?

In today's day and age of social media, it is ridiculously easy to create fake news on every topic. All you need is a keyboard and a social media account. You can claim everything with no proof, no evidence, and no scientific background and post it for people to see. Then others can share it with their networks and the 'news' can spread fast and without control to a huge audience. Much too often we can see posts, clips and stories related to medical advice and opinions that lack any medical scientific knowledge or proper base for the claims that are made. We see it when talking about vaccinations, we see it when referring to fluoride and we saw it recently in a movie that was created in order to relate root canal treatments to cancer and other diseases. In the medical field, fake news like that can be very dangerous. Many times, the average patient cannot properly assess the level of evidence behind the publication and the result could be life threatening. Patients are avoiding crucial medical treatments or taking other forms of treatments instead of the recommended, evidence-based ones, only because they heard or saw someone with no medical education but with a convincing appearance talking about it.

It is our responsibility as medical professionals to fight those irresponsible messages as much as we can to protect our patients from ignorance, recklessness and sometimes even maliciousness. The question is how can we do that? The freedom of information and the ease of access to mass distribution of data make it almost impossible to follow, let alone dispute, those false claims, statements and advice. However, we as health care professionals need to be more vocal and clear in our messages to the public. We must not tire of arguing and presenting the real evidence and the medical sense to our patients and communities. It is not easy for us, as we always try to be unbiased and cautious with our statements. We would rather say 'There is no evidence to relate root canal therapy to

cancer' than attempt to refute this unheard-of claim more sharply. We respond in this manner because this is how we were taught to make a scientific argument, because we need to be careful and responsible. However, from an outside, lay-person perspective, it sounds weak, uncertain and not convincing, as opposed to the 'fake news' side that can be as loud and clear as they wish just because they do not really have to provide evidence for anything. When dealing with such dangerous, pandemic, fake medical news, we might want to be less restrained in wording our replies and opinions. We must try to make sure that our audience understands the difference between a medical opinion by a medical professional and a post on Facebook or a movie on Netflix. We must be active, vocal, clear, precise and reliable when we fight this pandemic. Although we are more accustomed to fighting health pandemics, this false-information pandemic might be harder and more dangerous than some of the former. Nonetheless, it is our duty to do so, for our patients' sake.



Prof. Dr. Liran Levin

Division of Periodontology
School of Dentistry, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB, Canada
liran@ualberta.ca