

Combatting Misinformation During the COVID-19 Pandemic Via Social Media

Shehribano Ali,¹ Muhammad Murad Murtaza.¹

The Experience

The spread of misinformation has been prevalent in the world for quite a while now and it has been hypothesized that the widespread access to the internet can lead to digital wildfires of misinformation.¹ Such “wildfires” have also been seen to affect the healthcare sector worldwide; prominent examples of that being anti-vaxxers² who reject vaccinations based on misinformation pertaining to their side effects, cancer stigma leading to decreased cancer screening,³ and alternative medicine approaches for chronic illnesses like diabetes.⁴ Misinformation has been especially problematic during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the circulation of false and incomplete news and theories all over different social media platforms, extremes of opinions have developed among the population, with one end of the spectrum denying the very existence of a pandemic, and the other end being so fearful of the disease that they take extreme measures, such as suicide,⁵ excessive self-administration of unprescribed medication,⁶ or non-medical approaches like visiting the church despite being contagious.⁷

Amidst this havoc caused by COVID-19 related misinformation, students and doctors worldwide have used a variety of techniques to raise awareness regarding the different aspects of the pandemic and combatting misinformation pertaining to it.⁸ The Combined Military Hospital (CMH) Arts and Design Society at the CMH Lahore Medical College took the initiative of tackling it via the same means as it was spread- via social media. This society has a history of addressing current affair issues pertaining to different aspects of health via panel discussions with renowned professionals and engaging students in multiple arts, photography, and video making competitions to raise awareness. In lieu of the pandemic, the members of the society recruited a group of twenty-four volunteers who were led by the authors of this experience as their supervisors. The volunteers were all medical students who were recruited based on their previous contributions to the society, as well as their performance in interviews that gauged their enthusiasm to participate in the project, their ability to understand medical literature, and their ability to submit a sample video or poster related to COVID-19. Then, we established social media pages by the name “Pakistan Corona Virus Research Outlook” on both Facebook and Instagram⁹⁻¹⁰ (Figure 1) and used these platforms to spread valid and well-researched information regarding the disease among the general population. This was done by going through the new studies on COVID-19 that were published in PubMed indexed medical journals, and then presenting the data from these studies in the form of short animated videos or posters, which could be easily understood by people who did not have medical background or basic understanding of medical terminologies. The selection of these studies was done via

literature review of articles present on PubMed by the volunteers, which were then screened by the supervisors and a team of CMH Lahore Medical College alumni who are registered doctors with the Pakistan Medical Council and currently working as post graduate trainees belonging to a range of specialties, particularly internal medicine. The screening by these alumni depended upon the impact factor of the journal that had published the article in question and the acceptability of the data presented in the articles based on their clinical knowledge. These videos and posters covered a range of topics, including but not limited to the epidemiology, clinical presentation, prevention, and possible therapeutic solutions for the coronavirus.¹¹⁻¹³ We created our social media pages in March 2020, and over a period of six months managed to gain a following of over 14,000 people (last checked: March 2021).

Figure 1. Cover picture of the Pakistan Corona Virus Research Outlook page on Facebook.



In order to further aid our incentive of providing authentic COVID-19 related information to the public, we also created a Facebook group named “Corona Virus (COVID-19) Free Counselling”,¹⁴ which was also associated with our Research Outlook page. This group served the purpose of providing basic information regarding prevention and management of the virus in layman terms, so that the people could be well-equipped with managing mild symptoms themselves at home, without panicking unnecessarily or burdening the healthcare system which is already stretched too thin. We achieved this by drafting an online handbook¹⁵ that provided the relevant information.

Likewise, members who joined our Counselling group were also encouraged to post any queries they might have pertaining to the disease, which were then answered by senior members of the CMH Arts and Design Society and CMH Lahore Medical College Alumni who had also contributed to screening the articles for the Pakistan Corona Virus Research Outlook. The group has over one thousand members by March 2021.

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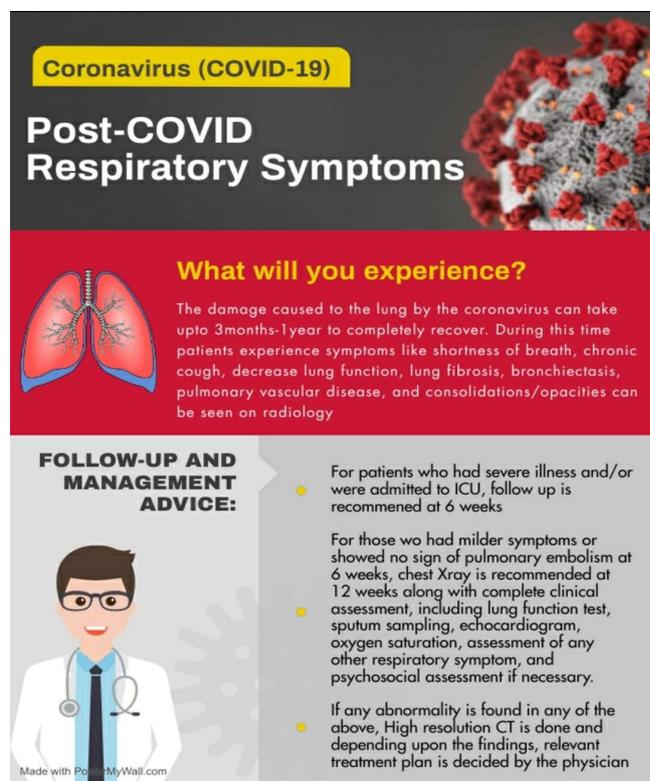
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Figure 2. “Post-COVID Hair loss” Poster made by author Muhammad Murad Murtaza.



With time, we observed that there was an increasing number of queries and concerns regarding post-COVID symptoms by members of the group. In order to address this issue, we decided to start a series on post-COVID syndrome.¹⁶ As part of this series, we made individual posters regarding the different symptoms experienced by patients even after recovering from the viral infection. These posters addressed concerns regarding the symptoms that may occur, as well as the follow up and management recommended for each of these based on research and published guidelines by experts.¹⁷ Examples of these posters include those regarding post-COVID hair loss as seen in Figure 2 and post-COVID respiratory symptoms (Figure 3). These posters presented the information in an easily comprehensible way, providing the public with a set of guidelines to follow in the case of appearance of any of the post-COVID symptoms, without panicking and believing false information that may be found elsewhere on the internet and may misguide them regarding the course of action they should adopt.

Figure 3. “Post-COVID Respiratory symptoms” Poster made by author Shehribano Ali.



As members belonging to the medical field, we feel it is our responsibility to ensure that the public does not fall prey to misinformation on social media, that could ultimately cause more panic, worsen the already sensitive situation, and increase the burden on the frontline medical workers. Through the aforementioned avenues on social media, we aimed to dispense valid and authenticated information to the people, addressing the relevant and popular concerns. This way, the population could have access to the latest medical information, researched and proven by experts, and they could remain well informed avoiding falling prey to false data found elsewhere on the internet. We played our small part in attaining our goal and using social media to widen our reach. Everybody, especially medical professionals, have been sailing through uncharted territories during this pandemic. It falls upon all of us to help ease the burden of the doctors fighting this pandemic on the frontlines in any way we can, even if it is merely combatting false information on the internet.

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