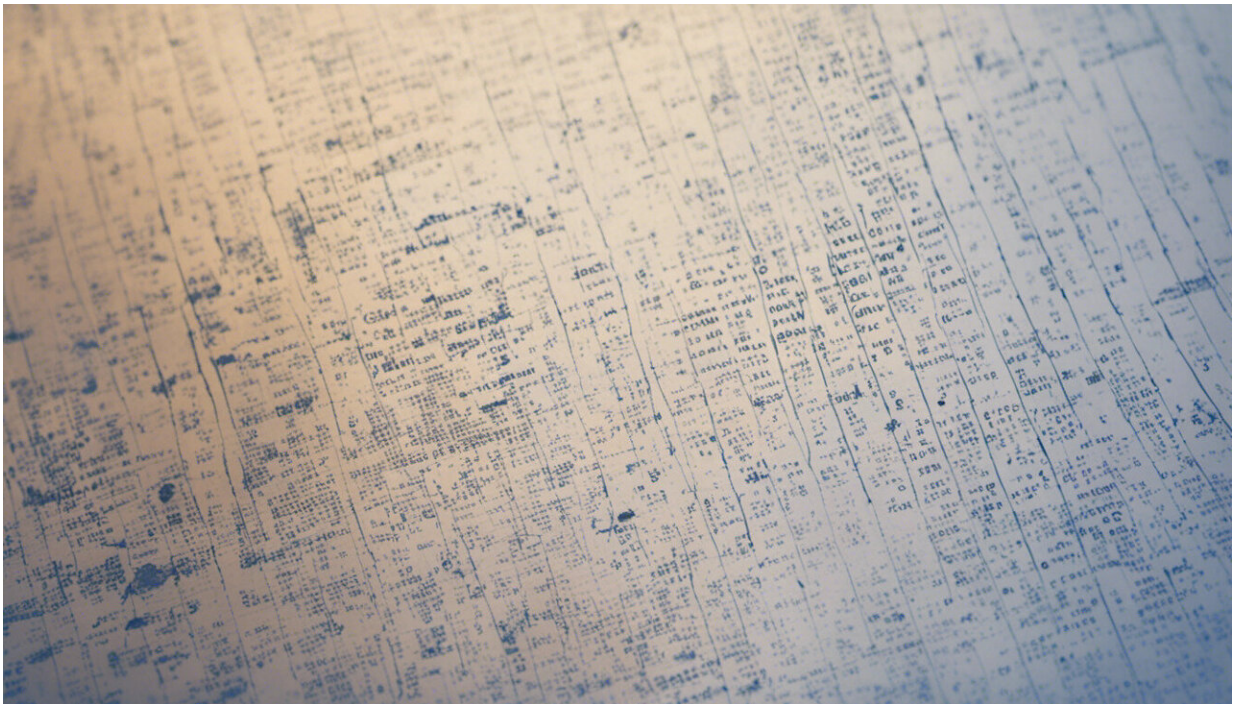


COVID-19 vaccine: Reliable communications needed to beat 'infodemic' of misinformation

November 10 2020



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A coordinated program to combat anti-vaxx misinformation and encourage confidence in a COVID-19 vaccine is essential if a take-up target of eight in ten people in the UK is to be achieved, according Oxford Professor Melinda Mills, author of a report published today by the British Academy and the Royal Society for the SET-C (Science in

Emergencies Tasking: COVID-19) group.

In a rapid review report, Professor Mills argues, "Online scare stories and misinformed concern over a COVID-19 vaccination are a threat to take-up, but open dialog and [public engagement](#) can help fill 'knowledge voids about vaccines' and ensure confidence."

Professor Mills argues good communications are essential to build [public support](#) and beat an "infodemic" of misinformation, and she calls for influencers and local ambassadors to spearhead a campaign aimed at encouraging support for the [vaccine](#), so the community achieves 80% protection.

Professor Mills, who produced a [key report](#) earlier in the year, on the wearing of face coverings, says, "There needs to be a frank conversation with the public about just how long it will take and that things will not immediately go back to normal when vaccines arrive. We need to move away from the one-way provision of information and generate an open dialog that addresses misinformation and does not dismiss people's real vaccine concerns and hesitancy. And, critically, when the time comes, we need to make vaccination itself convenient."

Scientists around the world have raced to create effective vaccines in the face of the deadly pandemic. Although vaccines are "the most successful public health measure in history," take up can be affected by multiple factors. Professor Mills says these are:

- Complacency of the perception of risk;
- Lack of confidence in the efficacy and safety of the vaccine;
- Convenience of access;
- Sources of information and communications; and
- Socio-demographic characteristics (education, sex, ethnicity, religion etc).

Professor Mills' research shows ethical planning for phased vaccine deployment is essential, if the program is to win support, "This would ensure fairness with priority given to older individuals, those in [care homes](#) or with comorbidities and [health care workers](#), but it should go beyond these groups to also prioritize vulnerable people, such as prisoners or the homeless, and front line occupations that aren't health-care related such as bus drivers, retail workers and teachers."

Good communications and reliable information are paramount in encouraging take up, says Professor Mills. Currently, the report says, some 36% of people in the UK and a majority of people in the US say they are uncertain or unlikely to be vaccinated against the virus. Records from seasonal flu vaccinations show there can even be very low take up in health care support staff (37%) and doctors (40%) and in regions such as London. In addition, there is potentially damaging anti-vaxx misinformation, from wildly-inaccurate internet conspiracy theorists and "foreign actors and third countries."

Professor Mills maintains, "Misinformation is driven by five key factors: distrust of science and selective use of expert authority, distrust in pharmaceutical companies and government, simplistic explanations, use of emotion and anecdotes to impact rational decision-making; and development of information bubbles and echo chambers."

She adds, the "anti-vaxx group is heterogeneous, largely characterized by what has been termed conservative libertarians and those who ascribe to natural health solutions and are skeptical of medical research."

Accurate, reliable information, rather than 'taking on' the conspiracies, is essential, Professor Mills believes, "It is important to address the need for information, rather than becoming embroiled in refuting groundless internet theories."

But she warns, "Public expectation management is crucial and urgently needed 'to clarify that life will not immediately return to normal' and non-pharmaceutical interventions will be needed during a transition period."

Provided by University of Oxford

Citation: COVID-19 vaccine: Reliable communications needed to beat 'infodemic' of misinformation (2020, November 10) retrieved 8 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-covid-vaccine-reliable-infodemic-misinformation.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.