

Improving vaccination rates by dispelling mistrust and conspiracy

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A leading University of Queensland academic is using his research to improve vaccination rates across the country.

Dr. Tom Aechtner from UQ's School of Historical and Philosophical Inquiry has launched the world's first Massive Open Online Course

(MOOC), AVAXX101, dedicated to anti-vaccination and [vaccine hesitancy](#).

This MOOC works alongside a website, [UQVaccinationChoice](#), to provide impartial and evidence-based information allowing people to make an informed decision for the health of their family.

"Australian anti-vaccination media focuses more on promoting distrust in officials and experts and propagating conspiracy narratives about vaccines than spreading stories about the purported dangers of vaccines," Dr. Aechtner said.

The research analyzes anti-vaccination media and also gauges rates of vaccine hesitancy—reluctance or refusal to vaccinate—across the country to address immunization doubts in light of counter-vaccine messages.

"While most Australians support immunizations, there remains a subset of the population which expresses vaccine hesitancy," he said.

"This can involve concerns about the safety and efficacy of vaccinations, including fears about vaccine ingredients, overloading the [immune system](#) and the perceived likelihood of adverse vaccine-triggered side effects and ailments.

"In fact, potentially one-third to one-half of Australian parents articulate concerns about vaccines."

The research showed that vaccination anxieties may be fuelled by small groups of media-vocal vaccine deniers, and that anti-vaccinationists' rhetorical tactics make their communications more persuasive than pro-vaccine messages.

"With this in mind, my research identifies the persuasion attributes of Australian anti-vaccination media and the ways that counter-vaccine messages employ persuasive cues when communicating to Australian publics."

Dr. Aechtner also analyzes [survey data](#) to identify social correlations and cultural connections that may be linked to vaccine hesitancy.

"Findings showed that when consuming online information, individuals tend to rely upon cognitive mental shortcuts to quickly determine a message's apparent reliability and trustworthiness," he said.

Dr. Aechtner said he hoped his work could have a positive influence.

"I am in a prime position to initiate beneficial societal change, and I hope to do this by uncovering the complexities of vaccine hesitancy, and the challenges of pro-[vaccine](#) advocacy."

Provided by University of Queensland

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