

# A prescription for improving medical communication

January 31 2024

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As we approach the four-year anniversary of the COVID-19 pandemic, health misinformation continues to be pervasive and negatively impact

public health. The United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that, in 2022, the amount of health misinformation present on social media reached as high as 51% on posts associated with vaccines, COVID-19, and emerging infectious diseases. To turn the tide on the impacts of misinformation, health care providers and public health experts need clear, effective ways to communicate with patients.

Drawing from established [communication strategies](#) in public health, social psychology, and [behavioral science](#), an article from the Penn Medical Communication Research Institute (PMCRI) outlines considerations for practitioners and experts when delivering vital health information.

[Writing in a JAMA article](#), the Penn team proposes a communication framework for providers to effectively convey their message to patients and communities across all ages, backgrounds, and belief systems.

Established methods for sharing medical information with patients—through in-person consultations in the clinic or other communication platforms—are not only inadequate in impacting patient health behaviors but can also often be counterproductive.

"Patients frequently arrive at a clinic visit with background false or misleading health information from media sources," said the study's co-author, Anne Cappola, MD, ScM, a professor of Endocrinology, Diabetes and Metabolism and Executive Director of PMCRI. "It is increasingly challenging for clinicians to address this in a nonconfrontational way, while trying to provide optimal patient care."

The paper outlines strong approaches to help providers overcome these challenges, like empathetic messaging, harm-reduction strategies, and weaving sound medical guidance into existing social narratives.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, public health guidelines and information shifted frequently, often with little notice or explanation to the public. And while the process of infectious disease research often entails an evolving understanding of the transmission and nature of an illness, failure to put these shifting views and guidelines into proper context for the average citizen can erode public trust in the validity of health authorities like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), WHO, and others.

The changing narratives can have varying impacts on different populations based on their level of trust and history and relationship with the medical establishment.

Health care providers, however, continue to be regarded as among the most trusted professionals in the US. When engaging patients in conversations around proper medical care, the Penn team says it's critical for practitioners to maintain honesty, clarity, and humility.

"Providers can alleviate frustration, mitigate confusion, and build trust with patients by being upfront about scientific uncertainty and the evolving nature of medical research," said study co-author Karthika Cohen, MS, MA, Director of Research and Operations at PMCRI.

"Communicating in an honest and empathetic manner, while being understanding of people's frustrations in the face of public health problems, can go a long way in establishing credibility in the medical profession."

Along with providing up-to-date and evidence-based information to patients, practitioners can harness the support of "trusted messengers"—such as community leaders and religious figures—to weave the latest guidelines into the ongoing public narrative.

New information is often filtered through our pre-held cultural biases, spiritual beliefs, personal histories, and moral values. The Black community is one example, following a longstanding history of mistrust of the medical establishment due to unethical research like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study and bias in health care, which have been linked to racial inequities and poorer health for this group overall.

The authors note that [public health](#) experts and medical practitioners should also take cultural and religious backgrounds into account when developing strategies to transmit care directives and health guidelines to patients.

"It's more important than ever for health experts and care providers to be really thoughtful about how they share [medical information](#) with patients," said Cappola.

"Depending on a patient's background and experiences, certain strategies may work better than others. But by leveraging these evidence-based approaches, practitioners can build trust, improve relationships, and deliver better health outcomes for their patients and communities."

**More information:** Anne R. Cappola et al, Strategies to Improve Medical Communication, *JAMA* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2023.23430](#)

Provided by Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania

Citation: A prescription for improving medical communication (2024, January 31) retrieved 29 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-01-prescription-medical-communication.html>

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