

Medical experts 'sound the alarm' on medical misinformation

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"Fake news" has become a popular term these days. But when it comes to medical advice, fake news can result in physical harm, even death.

The editors of more than two dozen cardiology-related scientific journals around the world published an editorial Monday to "sound the alarm that human lives are at stake" because of medical misinformation.

These physicians describe regularly encountering [patients](#) hesitant to take potentially lifesaving medications or adhere to other prescribed treatments because of something they read online. Or heard from friends. Or saw on television.

"There is a flood of bad information on the internet and social media that is hurting human beings," said Dr. Joseph Hill, the architect of the essay and editor-in-chief of the American Heart Association journal *Circulation*. "It's not just an annoyance, this actually puts people in harm's way."

The primary example illustrated in the editorial is the use of statins, a cholesterol-lowering medicine that can reduce [heart attack](#) and stroke risk in certain people. But doctors say too many of their patients shun taking statins because of bad information they picked up often from politicians, celebrities and others who lack medical expertise.

"We trust aeronautical science when we board an airplane; we trust the science buried within our cellphones; we trust mechanical engineering science when we cross a bridge; yet, many are uniquely skeptical of biological science," the doctors write in their essay.

Another example highlighted is "the entirely unfounded" concern that vaccines cause autism, a claim that has been debunked by 17 major studies.

Some patients think doctors are motivated by [financial gain](#), even going as far to suggest physicians get kickbacks for prescribing certain medications, said Hill, the cardiology chief at UT Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas.

"My practice over the years has been to say, 'Your insurance company is paying me to give you the best advice I can based on modern science. You are free to accept it or reject it. I hope you accept it, and I'm happy to provide you with evidence that backs recommendations, but in the end, it's your life and your body,'" Hill said.

Dr. Haider Warraich, a cardiology fellow who recently wrote about the dangers of medical misinformation in a *New York Times* essay titled, "Dr. Google Is a Liar," said he had to get personal to convince one heart attack patient to take his advice.

The patient, a young woman who was healthy aside from sky-high cholesterol, had refused to take a statin that another doctor had previously prescribed. She agreed to try the statin only after

Warraich shared that, after his own father had a heart attack, he urged doctors to start his father on the highest statin dose possible.

Because the benefits of medication and proper advice are often invisible, it can be difficult for patients to see how it affects them, said Warraich, a fellow in advanced heart failure and transplantation at Duke University Medical Center in North Carolina.

"If you have a fracture, or something that happens to you that's visceral, you're not going to take an herb to fix it. You're going to go to a surgeon to get it fixed and your pain will get better," he said. "But when it comes to something that prevents the risk of a future stroke or heart attack, or something like a vaccine which doesn't make you feel better immediately but is backed by very robust data, it's not as clear-cut in front of you."

In their editorial, doctors say the [mainstream media](#) holds some responsibility in resolving the problem.

"It is easy to find a rogue voice but inappropriate to suggest that voice carries the same weight as that emerging from mainstream science," they write.

Hill said leaders from Facebook and other [social media platforms](#) also need to help find a solution.

"We're trying to highlight the realities of the harm that [social media](#) also can do to our patients," he said. "I'm hoping that we can make it clear that this is a matter of life and death for many patients."

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