Fact Sheet: Misinformation and Disinformation

Misinformation and disinformation can have serious consequences for public health and safety. The public and clients often trust and rely on health professionals, such as nurses[1], to provide accurate, reliable, and evidence-informed information so they can make important decisions about their health and wellbeing (Nan et al., 2022). Misinformation and disinformation pertaining to health have been around for centuries; however, the impact of false information has increased in recent years due to digitization and increasing distrust of traditional authorities or experts (Federation of State Medical Boards [FSMB], 2022; World Health Organization, 2022). The purpose of this fact sheet is to understand what misinformation and disinformation is, outline nurses' accountabilities pertaining to accurate and reliable information, as well as strategies to mitigate the potential impacts of health misinformation.

Definitions

Misinformation refers to false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is spread unintentionally (Dempsey, 2022). Misinformation can range from obsolete information that was initially published in good faith, to deceptive half-truths, to entirely fabricated materials intended to mislead and confuse (Lewandowsky et al., 2020).

Disinformation refers to intentionally false, inaccurate, or misleading information that is deliberately disseminated with the aim of causing harm (Dempsey, 2022). Disinformation is often emotionally charged and designed to be persuasive and attention-grabbing. Furthermore, disinformation typically serves a purpose, such as monetary gain or political leverage (FSMB, 2022).

Accountabilities

There are several provisions related to the dissemination of accurate and credible information for which nurses are held accountable. These are embedded in the Code of Conduct for Registered Nurses and Nurse Practitioners. The following table outlines the accountabilities of nurses:

Accountabilities of GNs, RNs, and NPs
Code of Conduct for Registered Nurses and Nurse Practitioners 1.5 respect clients' right to make choices and informed decisions; and involve and support clients in making decisions; 3.4 seek and use the best available evidence to inform their practice, and to ensure that any information or advice given is evidence-based; 3.5 apply clinical reasoning and judgment when providing nursing care; 3.9 take steps to minimize risk and ensure that their nursing practice does not harm the health or safety of clients; 3.15 demonstrate professional judgment when they contribute to, use, and evaluate new knowledge and technology, and advocate for best practices; 5.1 are truthful in their communication, give accurate information and avoid misleading the client; 5.9 strive to protect clients from any type of harm, neglect or abuse, and take action to stop and refrain from unsafe, incompetent, unethical, or unlawful practices;

[1] For the purposes of this toolkit, the term "nurse" refers to graduate nurses, registered nurses, and nurse practitioners.

6.9 ensure professional statements that they publicly communicate are evidence-informed; 6.10 do not engage in any acts of professional incompetence, professional misconduct, or conduct unbecoming the profession and report any concerns related to these acts and/ or fitness to practice in compliance with the duty to report;
Additional Accountabilities of NPs
Standards of Practice for NPs Standard 2: Knowledge-Based Practice The NP integrates and applies a broad range of advanced theoretical and evidence-based knowledge to support safe, competent, and ethical NP practice. This is done by: • Integrating in-depth knowledge from nursing and other disciplines, critical inquiry, research, and clinical expertise to maintain evidence-informed NP practice (indicator 2.1); • Integrating qualitative and quantitative data from credible sources to make evidence-informed decisions and to initiate and manage change (indicator 2.2).

Risks of spreading misinformation or disinformation

Risks to the profession of nursing:

Inaccurate or misleading information that is spread by nurses can be especially harmful because their professional title gives credibility to their claims. The end result of nurses spreading misinformation or disinformation could include public confusion, erosion of trust within nurse-client relationships, and the undermining of confidence toward the nursing profession as a whole.

Risks to the individual nurse:

Nurses who spread misinformation or disinformation risk the possibility of disciplinary action. Because of nurses' specialized knowledge and skills, nurses ultimately possess a high degree of public trust and a platform within their communities. The health information that nurses share is held to a higher standard than members of the general public and they are expected to uphold all of their professional and ethical obligations when sharing health information.

Examples of Misinformation

Many examples of spreading misinformation exist. They can include, but are not limited to:

- Providing information to clients that is not backed by credible evidence.
- Manipulating online reviews to generate business or clients.
- Making exaggerated or false claims about a particular health treatment or product.
- Sharing claims about "Big-Pharma" and/or government agencies hiding cures or manipulating health interventions for financial gain or control of citizens.

Recommendations

Given that misinformation is more easily spread than truth and that it is frequently persuasive (Vosoughi et al., 2018), it is easy to become misled. However, there are several, evidence-informed strategies that

are effective in critically evaluating information, identifying misinformation, and educating others, such as clients, on recognizing accurate and reliable information.

Critically evaluating information

- Take a cautious stance toward information through word-of-mouth, on social media, or google searches.
- Recognize if the information is provocative, emotional, or targeting an individual (such as a public health official) rather than an idea or fact.
- Consider whether the answer or solution is something that science cannot yet provide (such as a new, emerging field of science or technology).
- Consider and reflect on your own biases.
- Do not assume others are critically evaluating information that they share.

Identifying and reporting misinformation

- Consider "lateral reading". Rather than reading new content in its entirety in a vertical fashion, learn to pause as you read and check claims in new tabs. Fact checkers learn the most about the credibility of a source and its claims with this strategy (Wineberg & McGrew, 2018).
- Slow down and think about any information provided, including:
    - Information sources
    - Expertise of the source
    - Verifiability of claims
    - Underlying motivation of claims (monetary, political etc.).
- The Canadian Centre for Cyber Security has identified quick tips to help identify "fake news".
- The World Health Organization recommends everyone help stop the spread of misinformation by Reporting Misinformation Online.

Conveying information to clients

Do not refrain from correcting misinformation out of fear that doing so will hinder the nurse-client relationship or increase a client's beliefs in misinformation. There is little evidence to support that correcting misinformation leads to negative outcomes; in fact, the majority of people take note of truthful information, even if it differs from their previously held beliefs (Wood & Porter, 2019).

Correcting misinformation is more likely to be successful by applying the following steps (Lewandowsky et al., 2020):

1. Fact: Lead with truthful and accurate information first. Do not rely on simple rebuttals, such as "that is not true".
2. Myth: Repeat the piece of misinformation directly before providing the correct information. Repetitions of misinformation should be avoided.
3. Fallacy: Explain which piece of the information is wrong and why. Explain why the incorrect information was thought to be accurate, why it is now clear that it is mistaken,

and why the alternative is correct. It is important for people to see the discrepancy in order to resolve it.

4. Fact: Restate the truth again, so it is reinforced as the last piece of information someone processes.

Resources

ScienceUpFirst - Together Against Misinformation

World Health Organization- Infodemic

The Debunking Handbook (only available in English at this time)

References

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