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Title: Using Medical Students as Champions Against Misinformation During a Global Pandemic

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Using Medical Students as Champions Against Misinformation During a Global Pandemic

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To the Editor: Like most other trainees, much of our medical training in 2020 was set behind computer screens. By December 2020, the excitement surrounding the COVID-19 vaccines in the medical education community was palpable. However, a quick scroll through social media showed a vastly different response to these vaccines by some online users—apathy, distrust, and disappointment. Circulating infographics alleged the vaccines carried a microchip or were a way to control the population size and would make people sick. Genuine fear and curiosity coupled with the seemingly fast turnaround time for the vaccines’ approval heightened the feelings of distrust and refusal. As scientists and health care workers struggled to curtail the misinformation, little was done in medical school curricula to teach medical students how to combat misinformation.1

At the University of Chicago, a team of biomedical librarians, attendings, residents, fellows, and medical students created the COVID Educational Support Team to summarize key literature on the vaccines using infographics and visual aids to help inform both clinicians and the community.2,3 As of August 2021, these infographics have garnered 842 views. This was a unique way for us as trainees to make a significant contribution to patient care and COVID-19 education, using our combined interest in art, graphic design, and patient-centered messaging. Based on our experiences, we now teach first-year medical students in a scientific communication and misinformation class how to critically assess scientific evidence and deeply consider their audience’s perspectives, then create their own infographics to dispel misinformation. In entering our training amidst a global pandemic, we saw firsthand how this communication skill is essential to both the individual patient-clinician relationship and public health. We hope that scientific communication becomes an explicit component of medical
education, equipping trainees to reach broad populations, build trust with underserved communities, and combat misinformation to empower patients.

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