



Infodemic, Persuasion and Propaganda in Health Care System– A Challenge for Nurses in Delivering Quality Nursing Care

Srivastava S*

Reader, Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences, India

***Corresponding author:** Sunita Srivastava, Reader, Nursing, Institute of Liver and Biliary Sciences, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi, India, Tel: 8368359360; Email: sunitasrivastava0405@gamil.com

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Abstract

This paper presents a theoretical view on infodemic, propaganda and persuasion in health care system and the challenges it poses in delivering quality nursing care. It analyzes the problem in context to nursing. For writing the review the multiple databases were searched for the original articles and reviews in the last 5 years. Initial search resulted in 50 articles, from which, 20 articles were shortlisted based on their titles and abstract as potentially relevant to this review. All these articles were further reviewed thoroughly. The review is presented to explain how infodemic, persuasion and propaganda affect the nursing practice. Many a times the persuasive and informative components are incorporated into propagandistic communication by the health care workers without even realizing the extent of their involvement and consequences. Infodemic has a massive, long lasting irreversible damage to the society.

The nurses encounter the issue of infodemics and various forms of mis communication on a regular basis in their nursing practice. Hence the main objective of this review is to sensitize the nursing fraternity on this issue and proactively equip them with the knowledge and awareness to avert or to manage such situations.

Keywords: Infodemic; Propaganda; Persuasion; Nursing Care; Nurses; Health Care System

Introduction

The role of information, education and technology in the health care has been remarkable and gained momentum over a span of years. It has led to the explosion of the information on a click of a mouse or a tap on the mobile panel with the wide and easy accessibility of internet everywhere to any age group. This causes the health care workers and health care consumers (patients) especially vulnerable to the various forms of mis or dis communication and infodemics especially during infectious disease outbreak or disasters. Now a days health care consumers rely heavily on the information

circulated online regarding their disease, treatments, alternative therapies. They tend to look for easy solutions through products available online for their symptoms. However, in this process they succumb to propaganda news and fake products claiming to be curing them without surgery or pain. One needs to critically asses the authenticity of these sources and the self-proclaimed health gurus who have written these articles or blogs. Earlier communication used to rely mainly on face-to-face interaction but with technology boom video calls, chats, virtual sessions, virtual meetings are the new normal. Persuasion as such is a challenging and laborious task which can only be accomplished through

communication. Somehow everyone willingly or unwillingly gets involved in it. It is important for nurses who are dealing with patients from diverse socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds on day-to-day basis to define and understand differences between these different forms of communication and understanding their use.

Understanding Distorted Information in Health Care Settings

However, there is no universal definition, fake news may refer to misleading content found on the internet, especially social media. It is similar to false news stories: wherein the story is a self-cooked up on and there is no truth in it and cannot be verified with facts, sources or quotes Desai S, et al. [1]. It occurs within a broader ecosystem of mis and disinformation. Misinformation is false or inaccurate information mistakenly or inadvertently generated or disseminated, and the intent is not to deceive. Disinformation is the information that is deliberately created and spread to influence public opinion or obscure the truth.

The classic example of this misinformation and fake news trending on social media causing detrimental effects on health care system was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here the media emerged to seek information about the disease. However, many occurrences were false news masquerading as reliable disease prevention and control strategies, which created an overload of misinformation. In this process, there was interference in the behavior and health of people, generating social unrest associated with violence, distrust, social disturbances, and attacks on health professionals Moscadelli A, et al. [2], Apuke OD, et al. [3].

The false news spreads like a wild fire and can have serious consequences for public health as it causes panic among people and disregards the scientific community in the eyes of public opinion. For example, during COVID time there was a news trending regarding consumption of pure alcohol - methanol - could eliminate the virus. It killed approximately 800 people in Iran, while another 5876 people were hospitalized for methanol poisoning Hassanian-Moghaddam H, et al. [4]. As per Secosan I, et al. [5], in their reports also claim that the participants, in fact, believed that alcohol consumption cured COVID-19 Secosan I, et al. [5].

This overproduction of data from multiple sources, the quality and the speed at which this new information which is not even verified from reliable sources is disseminated and create social and health-related impacts Tangcharoensathien V, et al. [6], Tsao SF, et al. [7], Rovetta A, et al. [8]. This phenomenon is called infodemic which involves a torrent of online information containing either false and misleading information or accurate content Pan American Health

Organization [9].

This term Infodemic was coined by journalist and political scientist David Rothkopf wherein he defines infodemic as: "A few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies, have affected national and international economies, politics and even security in ways that are utterly disproportionate with the root realities."

As per WHO [10] infodemics refers to- "too much information including false or misleading information in digital and physical environments during a disease outbreak. It causes confusion and risk-taking behaviors that can harm health."

The effects of this mis or dis information or fake news as per a systematic review of 10 studies by Borges do Nascimento, 2022 is that it reduce patients' willingness to vaccinate, obstructs measures to contain disease outbreaks, Instigate the physical interruption of access to health care, amplify and promote discord to enhance political crisis, Increase social fear, panic, stress and mental disorders, Enhance misallocation of resources and weakens or slows countermeasures interventions and it also exacerbate poor quality content creation. All the above this goes to say that it causes physical, social, political or economic distress to the society and individual.

Propaganda can be stated as the selective use of information for political effect or gain National Endowment for Democracy [11]. But fake news is usually related with financial gains. It plays a significant role in fraud and corruption in health care system. Some of the forms are big pharmaceutical companies, procedures and products which are not even tested and approved. Many a times health care professionals advise or conduct these tests or procedures and end up in causing deleterious effects on the physical, mental health of the individual Gambrell ED, et al. [12]. Quackery can be practiced by the nurses or other health care professional by making false promises, testimonials, advertising or promoting a product, drug, therapy or intervention without even knowing its effectiveness. They just did or promoted that as they were asked to do by their higher authorities or the organization which in turn may have some other motive getting fulfilled.

Fraud is another form of propaganda where knowingly specific information is hidden from the patients. This is usually done with the persuasion techniques employed by the health care workers where they are only briefed about the benefits and the harmful effects are not disclosed to them Gambrell ED, et al. [12]. Sometimes the patients are briefed about the side effects but in very mild forms. It is an act of deceiving and misrepresentation. At times the patients

are asked to undergo additional and unnecessary tests or treatment which are still undergoing research.

To add to the above list there are many fraudulent activities done from very powerful resources. That also includes propaganda and persuasion at various levels of health care system. It is well documented that the unsafe drugs have been dumped in third world countries and conflicts of interest that exists at all levels in medicine Angell M [13,14]. It involves bribing of involved officials and authorities for referrals or prescribing the specific drug in the healthcare settings. As mentioned in a study by Angell M [14], drug companies have given gifts worth tens of billions of dollars to medical professionals. Due to this these companies were able to significantly control the medical professionals to evaluate and use their products. This control and the conflicts of interest that permeate the medical field tend to allow the industry-sponsored trials published in medical journals to consistently favor sponsored drugs-mainly the harmful effects or negative results are not published, positive results are repeatedly published in different and diplomatic forms. They create an overall positive image Turner EH, et al. [15], Angell M [14], Gambrill ED [12]. This shows that deceiving and fraud is very real in the health sector and widespread.

In developing countries where nurses are still in the “following orders mode” and have hardly any “say” in the treatment planning and delivery are at highest risk of involving in propaganda, fraud and quackery. Majority of them are not even aware what they are involved in. They do anything and everything in the name of following what has been prescribed by the physician.

Propaganda in Clinical Research

The Clinical Researchers are not untouched by the propaganda as many a times they promote questionable conclusions. They get propagandized by the false materials or the product details and report them in the way the pharmaceutical companies or the stake holders desire to. When such content which is backed by the prominent health leaders and publishers is circulated in the social media the consumers are actually being fooled rather guided to adopt or consume something which is not even approved. Ioannidis JPA [16] expresses that most published research findings are false. Many a times bogus statements in texts, editorials, and professional articles that evidence-based practice (EBP) was developed are published to favor specific organization, individual or nation.

Propaganda has threatened the use of evidence-based practice in health care. It includes hiding limitations of the study Altman DG [17], Rubin A, et al. [18] preparing uncritical, incomplete research reviews related to health practices or

policy; ignoring counterevidence to views promoted Barkley RA, et al. [19], selective publication of research studies Turner EH, et al. [15], ignoring well-argued alternative views and related evidence or misrepresenting them; transforming risks into diseases (e.g., osteoporosis); biased estimates of the prevalence of concerns or diseases ; advocacy in place of evidence; arguing rather than responding. This propaganda is used by researchers in healthcare professions that result in inflated claim about “what we know” about causes, the accuracy of assessment measures, risks, and the effectiveness of remedies.

Persuasion as a Communication Technique

It is a “symbolic process in which communicators try to convince other people to change their own attitudes or behaviors regarding an issue through the transmission of a message in an atmosphere of free choice Perloff RM [20].

As per this definition, there is a message, there is an attempt of convincing or persuading, and the freedom to choose rests with the listener. It is derived from concepts of propaganda and miscommunication. It also involves meticulous planning and execution. If we look back at history, based on propaganda Hitler also used persuasion of people of Germany to get involved in wars and get killed. “How can someone persuade so many people”–what magic was done by him?. To answer this question much research was conducted in America. Understanding this Cognitive dissonance theory O’Keefe DJ [21] comes to our rescue-In general, a human being likes to have those thoughts and attitudes with which his mind also agrees to. There is an agreement between the two. But when there is a disagreement there occurs a cognitive dissonance. Let’s understand this with an example of a tobacco chewer [22]. He acknowledges the warning “tobacco chewing is injurious to health, cause oral cancer” written on the packet but still chooses to empty that pouch in his mouth. The thoughts and acknowledgment that challenge his tobacco chewing habit challenge the thought and action of chewing tobacco. Thus, the dissonance is created here [23].

Another theory of reasoned action explains that a person will do a thing if they have the intention to do so.

These two theories try to explain why and how persuasion works. It is a common technique used in guidance and counseling for a course to be chosen at a university or for the selection process. The contributory factors to persuasion are communication skills of the person, influential personality, ability to connect with the person, knowledge, need-based approach used, etc. after undergoing persuasion the person is free to choose but it affects his psyche [24]. The regular follow-up of the same person assists him further to choose the course. The nurses need to use it many times during her nursing career.

Propaganda and Persuasion

These are two different forms of communication. However, there is a very thin line which separates them and can be crossed very easily. One must understand that propaganda is achieved with the skill of persuasion which involves influencing or driving someone to change or believe in a specific ideology or idea. The entire market industry relies heavily on persuasion to achieve propaganda for their products. Nurses as a patient advocate uses persuasion to promote health and adopt desired lifestyle modifications. The persuasive communication skills are inherent in nursing profession. Hence many organizations exploit nurses for their personal benefits [25]. During 1975-1977, the Government of India introduced a program involving forced sterilization of men and women, in order to achieve population control as a poverty alleviation measure is a classic example of propaganda in the Indian health sector wherein all the health care workers used persuasion and often forced all males to undergo sterilization. This is clear violation of medical ethics which says that no surgical procedure can be carried out on an individual without their consent. Anonymity and informed consent had clearly taken a backseat to fulfill a political agenda of then ruling government. The condition of the females in sterilization camps was awful leading to many deaths. In this gruesome act of "obeying ruling government" to safeguard jobs by the health professional including nurses needs introspection. At that point of time, they did not even realize that they were a part of propaganda. According to them they were just following orders from the authorities [26].

Conclusion

It is advisable to read the complete story to headlines. Refer only credible sources of information. Persuasive communication brings a change in the cognition and effect of an individual. The nurses being the health care workers using these strategies commonly must use them judiciously and with an awareness that at no point of time it slips into propaganda.

Recommendations: a mixed methodology research on this area will help in bridging the gap in available evidence. This topic should be taught on a regular basis in various continuing nurses education programs and workshops.

Implications in Nursing: the nurses as the frontline workers become primarily affected by the effects of misinformation and infodemic. At administrative level adequate preparedness of nurses on this area is necessary. It should be included in the nursing curriculum theory and practice. Efforts for generating evidence-based practice are advocated.

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