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coronavirus

Covid-19: 'Multiple complaints' over anti-vaccine doctors ▶

▶ Kate Broughton • 05:00, Jun 12 2021

RYAN ANDERSON/STUFF

Auckland University research fellow Kate Hannah tells you what to look for to identify misinformation about the Covid-19 virus and vaccine.

Some medical professionals are spreading misinformation about the Covid-19 vaccine, with multiple complaints made to the New Zealand Medical Council, GPs say.

The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners is calling for patients and doctors to rely on “evidence-based” information to make decisions and give advice about the vaccine.

Medical director Bryan Betty said vaccine hesitancy was increasing and GPs were concerned about the influence of conspiracy theories and misinformation on the vaccination programme.

ROSS GIBLIN/STUFF

Royal NZ College of GPs medical director Bryan Betty said misinformation could derail the Covid-19 vaccination programme.

The role of some medical professionals in peddling misinformation was particularly concerning, he said.

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“The problem becomes harder to address when it comes from those who have medical or science backgrounds,” Betty said.

“This is a group that needs to be unified in their goal to keep New Zealand Covid-free.”

He said a “very small minority” of doctors were involved, but they could have greater influence due to their status in society and the use of social media.

New Zealand Medical Association GP representative Vanessa Weenink said she was aware “multiple complaints” had been lodged with the New Zealand Medical Council about registered medical professionals who were spreading misinformation.

A spokeswoman for the council confirmed members of the public have contacted the council with “concerns” about medical professionals promoting misinformation.

She could not say how many concerns had been received, nor how many would be investigated by the council's professional conduct committee. No notifications had been made to the Health Practitioners Disciplinary Tribunal for a breach of conduct concerning promotion of Covid-19 vaccination misinformation.

Vanessa Weenink, Christchurch GP and New Zealand Medical Association GP representative said she has made complaints about misinformation posted on Facebook five times.

Chief executive Joan Simeon said doctors had an “ethical and professional obligation to protect and promote the health of patients and the public, and to participate in broader-based community health efforts”.

“Council respects an individual’s right to have their own opinions but considers there is no place for anti-vaccination messages in professional health practice, nor any promotion of anti-vaccination claims including on social media and advertising by health practitioners.”

Concerns raised by the public about medical professionals were investigated by the council’s professional conduct committee, which could notify a practitioner to the tribunal.

Investigations were “ideally” completed within eight to 12 months from when the complaint is received, the council’s website said.

Simeon said a registered doctor was not required, as part of their annual renewal of their practising certificate, to demonstrate they were complying with council standards.

“It is open to council to review a doctor’s compliance with its standards whenever it has reason to consider a doctor is failing to do so.”

NZ is using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for its vaccination programme.

TED S. WARREN/AP

NZ is using the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for its vaccination programme.

Weenink said she was confident in the council's processes but was unsure if the professional conduct committee was adequately resourced to investigate Covid-19 misinformation complaints fast enough.

She had reported anti-vaccine content posted by medical professionals to Facebook on five occasions.

Facebook removed the content, but there was a large volume of content being published all the time, she said.

Betty said GPs fielded dozens of questions every day from patients who had clearly been influenced by misinformation.

"The concern is about what goes around the internet that is pseudo-science, that is not based on scientific-reality."

People were asking if the vaccine caused the disease, or altered a person's DNA, he said.

"The short answer is that the vaccine is well-tested, safe and effective," Betty said.

He said the Ministry of Health needed to "maintain the momentum" of its public

communications campaign to counter misinformation about the Covid-19 vaccine.

The most recent [survey on attitudes to the Covid-19 vaccine](#) showed potential uptake of the vaccine increased in April to 77 per cent, from 69 per cent in the March survey.

Just 7.8 per cent said they would definitely not get the vaccine.

However, Betty said if supplies of the vaccine were disrupted, "people may lose confidence and focus on the vaccine programme".

"I think we need to maintain our faith in it and just be pragmatic about this. It is a huge vaccine programme that is happening...there will be some hiccups along the way...but that won't be a reflection on the efficacy or the need to vaccinate the population."

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