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Flu narratives

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As if we needed more uncertainty in the managing of Covid-related risks, we are now witnessing competing narratives on the influenza vaccine.

In Malta, public health authorities are currently importing 200,000 flu (influenza) jabs for the public, who is entitled to free vaccination. This is double the usual yearly number, but this year the authorities are emphasising the importance of vaccinating against the flu given the wider Covid-19 open xt. Deputy Prime Minister Chris Fearne also announced that Malta has ordered 300,000

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By 11 October, the flu vaccine will once again be available for free in Malta, and centres will be set up in every town for this purpose. The narrative offered by the government in this regard is that as many people as possible should be vaccinated against the flu to help reduce the pressures on our health care system, whilst reducing the number of people who have flu symptoms similar to those of the coronavirus.

Thus, taking the influenza jab is important not only to protect one's health and those of others, but also to help ease the pressure on the country's health resources and infrastructure within a Covid context. This includes the availability of beds in hospital, the availability of medical workers and the efficiency of Covid swabbing.

Within the public sphere, various medical experts and practitioners are emphasizing this. For example, consultant paediatrician Prof Victor Grech is stressing the need to take the flu vaccine, adding that contracting influenza and Covid-19 doubles the risk of death. In an article in the Times, he added that the risk of side effects, lasting a day or two, from the flu vaccine are 'nothing when compared to actual influenza or the dreaded possibility of catching both' influenza and coronavirus.

Given that Covid numbers are rising, that we are approaching the influenza season and that schools are reopening, one may well catch both the flu and coronavirus. This is not to mention the fact that despite new covid-related restrictions announced by the government in the past weeks, one still witnesses examples of non-social distancing in public places such as pubs on a daily basis.

In an interview with the Malta Independent, the same Dr Grech emphasized that when faced with a open ion of both viruses simultaneously, it will be difficult to detect which virus one is dealing with.

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Against such evidence-based narratives, one finds the production of fake news in a post-truth context. Social media are a main battleground for such narratives, with Facebook being a vivid platform among others.

A recent report released by global non-profit organisation Avaaz highlighted the degree of health misinformation on Facebook, concluding that the widely-used social media platform is failing to keep people safe and informed during the Covid-19 pandemic. Avaaz found that false or misleading health information were viewed around 3.8 billion times on Facebook over the past year and that they peaked during the pandemic. Such narratives ranged from anti-vaccine communities to bogus health cures and conspiracy theories, which we all have undoubtedly encountered during these past months.

Unfortunately, over the past year, the top 10 websites spreading health misinformation were quoted by Avaaz as having nearly four times the viewership on Facebook than the websites of 10 leading health institutions, such as the World Health Organisation and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

In the meantime, the European Commission and UNESCO are two organisations amongst others attempting to confront the production of non-scientific narratives. In a list of recommendations, they suggest that internet users check the validity of information before sharing it. One can check the authors of the article in question - such as, for example, whether they are qualified by reputable organisations - and whether they refer to evidence or declare themselves self-proclaimed experts.

One can check whether the source in question is quoted by reputable media sources and experts or whether the source is unclear or debunked by fact-checking websites. Finally, one can also check the tone and style of the narrative in question: Is it balanced and fair, or sensationalist and one-dimensional? Does it acknowledge complexity in the pursuit of factual knowledge or does it simply present a dogma?

Let us keep in mind that one strength of the scientific method is that it is reviewed by qualified peers, it is subject to revision when new knowledge is discovered and most importantly, it is open to scrutiny, whereas narratives produced by groups - such as the anti-vaxxers - fail such tests and rely on spectacle, slogans, and sensationalism.

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