

500 doctors demand Facebook disclose data about COVID misinformation

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The request and subsequent response from a longtime patient left Dr. Kavita Patel befuddled, frustrated and angry.

Earlier this week, Patel's patient lost her job and [health insurance](#) because she refused to get a COVID-19 [vaccine](#) as part of an employee mandate.

The patient asked if Patel could write an exemption to return to work. Patel refused and asked the patient, whom she treated for COVID in June 2020, why she was so adamant against a vaccine.

"She believes what her friends on social media told her that the vaccine will give her COVID," said an exasperated Patel, a physician and a fellow at the Brookings Institute. "I'm still trying to get through to her to reconsider!"

Patel is among the more than 500 U.S. public health care professionals battling the ongoing spread of COVID who signed a letter demanding Facebook disclose its data regarding disinformation about the virus and the vaccine. The letter, shared exclusively with U.S. TODAY, urges the tech giant to end a "national nightmare" and "go beyond providing select data points." The doctors pointedly say "the lack of shared data and transparency to researchers and the public is deadly."

"This deception must end now," the letter said. "So many deaths could have been prevented, and we must act with haste to prevent more, particularly with vaccines becoming imminently available for young children. We simply cannot afford another deadly round of COVID and vaccine misinformation."

The letter comes a week after Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg changed the parent company's name to Meta as a pivot toward the metaverse. Two months in the making, the doctors' letter further gained momentum following leaked documents provided by whistleblower Frances Haugen to the Securities and Exchange Commission and Congress about the harms caused on Facebook and Instagram, and its parent company's

failure to take action.

"The recent Facebook whistleblower disclosures have confirmed what many of us have suspected for a long time: that Facebook has repeatedly stonewalled the public, lawmakers and academics over the last 18 months despite having had "deep knowledge" about the scope and nature of COVID-19 and vaccine disinformation across its apps," the letter said.

Facebook didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. But in a blog post in July, Facebook Vice President of Integrity Guy Rosen said the platform had removed more than 18 million pieces of COVID misinformation, and "more than 2 billion people" had viewed reliable information about COVID-19 and vaccines on Facebook.

Yet, the disinformation on Facebook has been a nearly two-year battle for physicians on issues ranging from the debate over catching the virus to wearing masks to now whether or not to get a vaccine, said Dr. Céline Gounder, an infectious diseases specialist and a clinical assistant professor of medicine at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine.

The doctors write in the letter that the "viral spread of lies and conspiracy theories online have led people to refuse safe and effective vaccines" and enabled a deadly wave of the Delta variant. Gounder cites a recent report from the nonprofit Center for Countering Digital Hate that found a dozen accounts were responsible for 65% of the anti-vaccine misinformation spreading on Facebook and Twitter.

"It's beyond maddening when (misinformation) prevents you from doing your job because they keep parroting information that they see, and share, on Facebook," said Gounder who served as a coronavirus advisor for President Biden's transition team. "Facebook has become a threat to

public health."

Despite the heavy criticism, Zuckerberg wrote a post in March about Facebook's push to help 50 million people get vaccinated as the campaign began to expand in the U.S. and elsewhere globally. He also told his followers about a COVID information center and when and where to get vaccinated.

"The data shows the vaccines are safe and they work," Zuckerberg said. "They're our best hope for getting past this virus and getting back to normal life."

Nonetheless, the doctors' letter said that this "infodemic has polarized and politicized our society's dialog." The misinformation on Facebook, the doctors write, has directly led to harassment and violence not only toward public health officials and healthcare professionals, but other frontline workers ranging from grocery store employees to airline staff.

The health care experts write that while Facebook claims it is taking responsible steps toward removing, labeling or down-ranking disinformation, it's far from enough.

One of Facebook's strategies is "not to engage but ignore," said Gounder, who testified before Congress in April about COVID misinformation. She added that while the U.S. is among the biggest exporters of misinformation and Facebook amplifies that, it's even worse in other countries that have less access to healthcare.

And as far as limiting the spread of health misinformation, Gounder believes Facebook also has "a moral and ethical obligation" to stakeholders and not just its shareholders.

Gounder said any product intervention by Facebook, including "hiring

legions of people to take down stuff or creating AI to do it," would be cost-effective because any "real intervention" would reduce user engagement and cut company profit.

"They do things around the margins that have very minimal impact on its profits," Gounder said.

Her thoughts echo a request the doctors make at the letter's conclusion.

"Put saving lives ahead of a narrow-minded view of your business. Rather than allowing COVID to continue to kill us, help us bring this national nightmare to an end," the letter said. "Facebook, disclose your data NOW."

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