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'One of the biggest problems confronting medicine today': University of Chicago offers class on misinformation

By Lisa Schencker
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Dr. Vineet Arora, left, and Sara Serritella lead a Zoom class for medical students and health care professionals aimed at teaching them how to fight misinformation in medicine at the Biological Sciences Learning Center at the University of Chicago on Aug. 18, 2022, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

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Patients have long been told to turn to their doctors for accurate, trusted health information.

But in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, doctors' voices have sometimes been drowned out by social media users who blast misinformation across the globe, leading patients to make questionable, and sometimes dangerous, choices about their health.



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Now, a Chicago medical school is offering a new class aimed at better equipping doctors and other medical professionals to be heard: a course on how to battle medical misinformation. The University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine began offering the class to medical students last year and recently developed a condensed version for nurses studying for their doctorates, pharmacy residents and senior medical students.

“We’re trying to essentially make it a fair fight,” said Sara Serritella, one of the instructors, who also serves as director of communications for the UC Institute for Translational Medicine. “As we saw during the pandemic, this whole crisis of having to communicate science in a way that builds trust can literally be life or death.”



Sara Serritella leads a Zoom class for medical students and health care professionals aimed at teaching them how to fight misinformation in medicine at the Biological Sciences Learning Center at the University of Chicago on Aug. 18, 2022. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

The class is one of the first of its kind at a U.S. medical school. Though it grew out of the pandemic, Dr. Vineet Arora, who teaches the class with Serritella, said misinformation in medicine extends far beyond COVID-19.

“When we think about the future and with the reemergence of things like polio, we need to make sure we’re teaching tomorrow’s health professionals how to tackle things in way that reaches the public where they’re

at,” said Arora, who is dean for medical education at the medical school and a co-founder of the Illinois Medical Professionals Action Collaborative Team (IMPACT), an advocacy group of medical professionals.

On a recent day, Serritella, a former reporter, taught the Zoom class how to hold an audience’s attention. The lecture, at times, resembled what might be taught in a beginning journalism class. Arora and Serritella teach students to hone their communication skills to help them dispel health-related myths.

Serritella, her eyes wide and her voice full of energy, told students to connect emotionally with their audiences, to tell a story rather than just rattle off facts and to lead with the most interesting part. She told them to be “surgically precise” when choosing their words, cutting out jargon.

The students then spent the second half of the class in small groups, brainstorming which myths to address for each of their projects. Dr. Eve Bloomgarden, an endocrinologist at NorthShore University HealthSystem and IMPACT co-founder, who is also working with the class, helped the students refine their ideas. By the end of the course, students are supposed to produce an infographic that they can share with patients or online, dispelling a health care myth.

The first time the course was offered last year, many of the students chose to tackle myths related to COVID-19.



Dr. Vineet Arora leads a Zoom class for medical students and health care professionals aimed at teaching them how to fight misinformation in medicine at the Biological Sciences Learning Center at the University of Chicago on Aug. 18, 2022, in Chicago. (Erin Hooley / Chicago Tribune)

One infographic from a past class features a drawing of a bird in a tree asking, “Should I get the COVID shot if I already had COVID-19?” In the following frames, other birds explain, in simple one- or two-sentence bubbles, why people who’ve already been infected should still get vaccinated.

Another student who hailed from a rural community made an infographic about [ivermectin](#), a drug that some people believed could be used to treat COVID-19 but has not been shown to be safe or effective for that purpose. She decided to focus on ivermectin after hearing about people in her community using it, Serritella said.

Another student took on the myth that people should cut sugar out of their diets. “Did you know that sugars and carbs are important for health, but too much of either can be harmful?” the student asked in the infographic.

One infographic focused on signing up to be an organ donor. “Being an organ donor won’t affect your own care if you are sick,” it said.

Second-year medical student Maeson Zietowski produced an infographic dispelling myths about gender-affirming hormone care.

He wrote in his infographic that use of puberty blockers — medication that can be used to temporarily suppress puberty in transgender and gender nonconforming children — can “give families time to explore their child’s gender and gather information without causing distress to the child” that can sometimes be brought on by puberty. He wrote that, “If stopped, puberty will resume normally as the sex assigned at birth.”

Zietowski said the class taught him there are many resources to help medical professionals speak out in engaging ways. Many of the students used the free program Canva to produce their infographics.

“I think people are counting themselves out because they think they don’t have the design skills or don’t feel confident in what they’re putting out, or don’t think their voice should be the voice saying this,” Zietowski said.

Naomi Tesema, a third-year medical student who worked on infographics about COVID-19 vaccines and has worked with the class, said it’s important for future doctors to understand how to communicate with patients and communities, especially those who may have been marginalized.

Tesema, whose parents immigrated to the U.S. from Ethiopia, said some patients [may not trust the health care system](#) because they don’t see themselves represented in it, they haven’t been taken seriously by doctors or they come from groups that were mistreated, such as in the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, in which Black men with the disease went untreated for years.

She said she used the skills she learned while making the infographics to talk with family members, friends and patients at free clinics where she worked.

“We have to be able to communicate with people, and we have to be able to establish a way for them to trust us,” Tesema said.

Dr. Andrea Anderson, a senior medical education consultant with the Association of American Medical Colleges, said she hopes more medical schools offer similar classes in the future. The University of Chicago’s medical school is offering the class now to pharmacists and nurses as part of a grant it received from the association, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

It's one of five medical schools that received the grant money to address medical misinformation, with other schools embarking on different types of projects, such as using actors to help students practice their communications skills, or developing online training videos, Anderson said.

"I would say that medical misinformation is one of the biggest problems confronting medicine today," Anderson said. "It's our job as medical educators to make sure those trainees are best equipped with the skills they need to communicate with patients during these very challenging times."



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