Fighting the COVID-19 “Infodemic” in South Africa: How Conspiracy Theories Undermined Protection

A Short storytelling based on the peer-reviewed paper:

Bam, N.E. (2022). Strategies to address conspiracy beliefs and misinformation on COVID-19 in South Africa: A narrative literature review. ***Health SA Gesondheid***, 27, 8 pages. doi: https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v27i0.1851

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Introduction: A Dual Pandemic

When COVID-19 emerged, the world faced not only a deadly virus but also an “infodemic”, a flood of misinformation and conspiracy theories spreading as fast as the disease itself. In South Africa, these false narratives profoundly shaped people’s willingness to follow protective measures and accept vaccines, undermining efforts to control the pandemic.

The Challenge: A Flood of False Information

From the earliest days of the pandemic, misinformation spread widely, especially through social media. Common beliefs included:

- COVID-19 was a bioweapon created by China or America.
- 5G mobile networks spread the virus through radiation, leading to attacks on cell towers.
- Vaccines could alter human DNA.
- Vaccines contained microchips to track people.
- Vaccination was a new form of control by former oppressors.

Far from being harmless rumours, such claims eroded adherence to public health measures like mask use and distancing, while fuelling vaccine hesitancy. In some cases, these theories were amplified by influential figures, including politicians and even scientists further complicating public trust.

A Stark Reality: South Africa’s Vaccination Struggle

By October 2021, out of nearly 40 million adults in South Africa, only 9.53 million (24%) were fully vaccinated. This strikingly low uptake reflected the corrosive effects of misinformation.

The author of this study observed the problem first-hand: in community projects, students expressed fears of infertility and death from vaccines, concerns rooted directly in conspiracy theories. Even the author delayed vaccination, only proceeding after trusted colleagues and national leaders, including President Cyril Ramaphosa, modelled vaccine acceptance.

Why Do People Believe Conspiracy Theories?

- The study highlights several psychological drivers:
- Uncertainty and fear: In crises, people crave explanations. When official information seems scarce, shifting, or overly technical, conspiracy theories fill the void.
- Control and reassurance: False beliefs provide a sense of order, even if misguided.

- Emotional impact: Conspiratorial thinking is linked to higher anxiety and depression, reinforcing the cycle of fear and mistrust.

The Path Forward: Strategies to Combat Misinformation

The research points to three broad strategies to fight the “infodemic”:

- Fact-Checking and Verification
- Global initiatives like WHO’s EPI-WIN network provide timely, evidence-based information.
- Local health authorities must deliver consistent, accessible messages via trusted, unbiased channels.

Clear Explanation and Community Engagement

- Facts alone are not enough. Healthcare workers should listen empathetically to fears, validate concerns, and provide tailored guidance.
- Community dialogues encourage open discussion and help reshape misconceptions.
- Empowering People with Knowledge and Trust
- Scientific literacy: Equip the public and journalists with tools to critically evaluate information.
- Positive messaging: Share stories of recovery and resilience to balance fear-based narratives.
- Pre-bunking (“inoculation”): Provide correct information before misinformation takes root, strengthening resistance to false claims.
- Trusted voices: Experts, doctors, community leaders, and even former conspiracy believers can be effective messengers.
- Accessible platforms: Disseminate information through social media, radio, television, churches, and community networks to reach diverse audiences.

Conclusion: Turning the Tide on the Infodemic

The South African experience demonstrates how conspiracy theories can weaken pandemic response by fostering fear, mistrust, and resistance to life-saving measures. Yet this study also shows that these challenges can be managed. By combining evidence-based communication, community engagement, and long-term investment in scientific literacy, societies can build resilience against misinformation.

Ultimately, just as vaccines protect against viruses, informed and trusted communication can “immunize” communities against harmful conspiracy theories. Building a culture of science-based knowledge from an early age is essential, not just for the current pandemic, but for future health crises.