

FIRST OPINION

How to disrupt the health misinformation business model

People need access to reliable evidence at the moment they encounter a questionable health claim online



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By Paul Martin Jensen and Avi Tuschman Aug. 13, 2026

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Over the last several years, fearmongering about statins has exploded, as misinformation alleges that they damage the brain, liver, and muscles, among other problems.

Oxford researchers recently published a study in the Lancet Digital Health that should help with one common concern involving muscle disorders. Whether it ultimately does, however, will tell us a lot about the influence of online misinformation, and the scientific community's ability to counter it.

Motivated by patients' concerns, the researchers analyzed the health records of 5.7 million people in England to build and validate a model that estimates an individual's risk of developing serious muscle disorders from taking statins. The risks are exceedingly low: The model predicts that 99.6% of people identified by their general practitioners as eligible for statin treatment were at low risk of serious muscle disorders. A clinician could use the model to help a worried patient calculate their own risk, rather than sharing a population average.

That ought to be reassuring. But the question is whether accurate information can reach patients through an information environment increasingly shaped by voices outside medicine.

A poll published by Pew Research in May shows 4 in 10 adults get health information from social media influencers and podcasts. Half report struggling to know what is accurate. Online influencers are both stoking and exploiting this uncertainty, turning health misinformation into a business model.

The business model works like this: Amass online followers by stoking fears of mainstream medicine. Brand yourself as the underdog battling the establishment. Build trust by appearing more human and vulnerable than a conventional clinician, scientist, or pharmaceutical brand. Then refer your followers to an online store selling supplements, "cleanses," or coaching programs.

One revenue stream comes from monetizing our fear of outbreaks. When news broke of the hantavirus and Ebola outbreaks, within hours some social media influencers were promoting fake cures. The bigger danger, though, is coming from influencers urging patients to reject approved treatments for common and serious health conditions, from cancer and heart disease, to diabetes, obesity, epilepsy, and mental health disorders.

It may seem ironic that this business model targets some of medicine's greatest successes. But that is precisely the commercial logic: Poach customers from the largest pools of

patients by making routine prevention — like vaccines — feel risky.

Statins have also been a great triumph: Hundreds of millions of people have been prescribed statin drugs to help prevent heart attacks and strokes. The medicines are inexpensive, deeply studied, and effective: Large randomized studies show they lower LDL cholesterol and extend life. That is what makes them so valuable to the misinformation economy: not because the evidence is thin, but because the audience is enormous.

As early as 2019, a JAMA Cardiology essay warned that fear-based medical misinformation was spreading from vaccines to statins. Since then, the warning has aged well. Statin posts on Reddit have been increasing by about 33% annually, with the tone mostly neutral or negative. A 2025 analysis of cholesterol videos on TikTok found more than 40% of the most-viewed posts were inaccurate, with potentially harmful information in more than a third.

In many of these posts, influencers steer followers away from taking FDA-approved medicines and instead using fish oil, cinnamon, garlic, turmeric, plant sterols, and red yeast rice, all of which fail to beat placebo for lowering LDL cholesterol. Unsurprisingly, a large study linked negative statin news to a higher likelihood patients would discontinue treatment and face higher risk of heart attack and death.

Relying on platforms to flag such false claims hasn't worked. To counter statin misinformation, the Mayo Clinic featured on YouTube Stephen Kopecky, a cardiologist who runs its Statin Intolerance Clinic. As National Geographic reported in 2025, YouTube recommended videos alongside Kopecky's Mayo Clinic interview that promoted a "Big Pharma" statin conspiracy and claimed LDL cholesterol is a myth. Meanwhile, Meta's Facebook and Instagram have rolled back platform-level fact-checking in the United States, X has moved away from traditional fact-checking, and YouTube has loosened its misinformation policies.

The Oxford statin model offers one way to counter fear with evidence: It turns population-level research into an estimate of an individual patient's risk that a clinician can discuss with that patient.

But misinformation often reaches patients before their doctors do. People need similar access to reliable evidence at the moment they encounter a questionable health claim

online. Patients encountering a dubious medical claim on TikTok, YouTube, or a podcast rarely have an equivalent source of evidence available in the same moment. They are instead left judging medical claims based on influencer charisma and algorithmic reach.

There's a simple observation that makes us optimistic about the potential to push back against health misinformation: Nobody wants to be exploited. People are trying to protect themselves and their families. They need better ways to see when fear is being used against them.

The solution then, is to make it easier for people to understand when they are being manipulated. Part of the solution is third-party consumer applications built to verify online information at scale. NewsGuard's HealthGuard product offers a web browser extension that rates the reliability of health-related websites and points users to trustworthy sources. Crickit.ai, a tool one of us has built, displays factual verifications over social videos in real time, like subtitles. In both cases, these are tools consumers take with them across platforms and websites, rather than depending on each platform to police every claim on their behalf. As more tools like this emerge, we see a possibility for online influencers themselves to embrace factual verification to make their content more reliable and to build trust with their audiences.

The other part of the solution is educational: Give people a way to distinguish content that respects their intelligence from content that tries to hack it. As one of us learned from growing up in a cult-like religious movement, the context of a claim is just as important as its content. Us-versus-them narratives ("Big Pharma" versus "natural cures"); claims that make people feel they're being let in on forbidden knowledge ("the natural cure your doctor doesn't want you to know," or "read this before it gets taken down"); and communication built around easily remembered, endlessly repeated clichés ("wake up," "do your own research," and "follow the money") are all hallmarks of manipulative communication that anyone can learn to identify. If people can spot them early, they can slow down, check the claim, and ask who benefits.

None of this is meant to suggest social media platforms and regulators are off the hook. Both must enforce rules that require content creators to disclose their commercial interests. That is especially important when licensed health care professionals sell unregulated supplements as medical cures, or when patient advocates share stories that

promote prescription drugs without clearly disclosing their financial relationships.

For the foreseeable future, billions of people will be making consequential health decisions based on what they read or hear on social media and podcasts. They deserve to know what is factual before fear, false certainty, or blind hope leads them into a life-altering medical mistake.

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