

Communication in the times of COVID-19

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The unprecedented crisis posed by the infectious SARS-CoV-2 virus has brought the need for effective communication into sharp focus. As the fight is being waged on multiple fronts from developing vaccines, communication about the risks of the disease, social distancing and COVID appropriate behaviour has been the focus right from the initial days of the pandemic. With COVID-19 raging around for about a year, now the focus has shifted to vaccines, mutants and variants of the virus.

One aspect that has been constant during the pandemic is the need to communicate effectively to the society. As largely acknowledged, 'misinformation' which has led to an infodemic has posed a huge challenge while combatting the virus. Not surprisingly, countries which had prioritized communication of COVID-19-appropriate behaviour early on, such as New Zealand, have fared well in dealing with the pandemic. India has employed innovative ways of communication in the current pandemic. For instance the mobile users received messages on social distancing in the first wave of the pandemic. With the vaccines becoming available, the message about the importance and need of vaccination is being emphasized. This is an effective way of communication with minimal resources. Most importantly, the intense second wave of the pandemic in India, reiterates the continued need for effective communication to the public on COVID appropriate behaviour accompanied with other necessary measures for mitigation of the SARS-CoV-2 spread.

The Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), New Delhi, a premier S&T organization with 37 research laboratories spread across India, has

focused on effective communication as a strategy to address the crisis early in the pandemic. This was in addition to the focused scientific efforts of CSIR on building diagnostic capacity and novel diagnostics, carrying out clinical trials and developing ventilators. Communications were initiated in March 2020, when India announced its first lockdown. Several posters, info-graphics, cartoons, etc. were made in English and regional languages given the diversity of the country, which were displayed by different laboratories of CSIR across India and on social media.

Addressing the misconceptions and false claims and stopping the infodemic is as important if not more during a pandemic. For instance, at the beginning of the pandemic, the social outcasting of COVID-19-affected people as well as doctors and nurses treating such patients was a major issue in the country. Another concern was the spread of 'cures/treatments' without any evidence or data, especially through social media like WhatsApp. Currently, the challenge is regarding misinformation about vaccine efficacy and side effects. The need for sound and scientific opinions and advice has been acutely felt during the pandemic. CSIR and other organizations continue to play an important role with scientists engaging with the media and writing articles and timely scientific communications about COVID-19. In a country obsessed about movie stars and cricket, having scientists and doctors occupying prime TV slots and science stories being featured as main headlines is unparalleled and is indicative of the times we live in and the need felt for scientific information.

With webinars becoming a way of life in these times, CSIR also organized such

events that were streamed through social media in Hindi, English and regional languages so that the work being carried out by scientists at CSIR and other organizations in combating COVID-19 reaches the common man. The webinars covered a wide variety of topics from vaccines to genomic sequencing to the more recent SARS-CoV-2 variants to convey the science and answer various queries and concerns of people.

Apart from communication about the disease and precautions, there is a need to communicate the R&D that is being done so that society is engaged and appreciates the efforts being made within the four walls of a laboratory. While CSIR is a scientific organization focused on R&D, the COVID-19 pandemic has propelled it to take on more public communication role in addition to science communication in novel ways. Besides its role in R&D, the scientific community can play a vital part in communication during any public health crisis and this response should serve as a template for the future. We acknowledge that these efforts need to be scaled up manifold and do hope that such initiatives will gain momentum even beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. This may not be the last pandemic and science is eternal. Therefore, we need to harness the interest of the common man towards science, which this pandemic has bestowed upon the scientific community.

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