Letter to Editor

Media Literacy as an Effective Tool against Infodemic in Control of COVID-19 Pandemic Crisis: A Letter to Editor

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Introduction

For the first time in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province in the People's Republic of China, in December 2019, a viral disease called COVID-19 spread and was distributed rapidly to other areas of the world, as the World Health Organization (WHO) declaring a pandemic of the disease on March 11, 2020 (1). People across the world have gone through a severe crisis over the COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing socioeconomic consequences and detrimental effects with millions of people contracting the disease and more than one million deaths (2). Whereas the WHO and several countries have done their best to control the pandemic, the world has also witnessed a type of pandemic in terms of information and misinformation on the disease as a vast amount of information has been published via social media, mass media, news agencies, and the press without being validated in the first place (3). In other words, unvalidated information is spreading swiftly on social media; hence, it seems essential to prevent the spread of misinformation and false news as long as the disease is still prevalent (4). Consequently, the WHO has recently decided to cooperate with the most popular social media, such as Facebook, Tencent, Pinterest, Twitter, and TikTok, to provide people around the world with the latest accurate information regarding COVID-19 (5). To publish correct information after the announcement of the COVID-19 outbreak by the emergency section of China's public healthcare system, the WHO has introduced a new information service called WHO Information Network for Epidemics (EPI-WIN) aiming at publishing relevant precise information for specific target groups (6).

The phenomenon of information overload started in the middle ages but what differentiates such an overload from what the world is experiencing today is the presence of social media. Social media are like viruses traveling with people and can spread even faster than viruses. Therefore, the WHO's communication office has done its best to present accurate answers to the questions raised by the public to fight against the spread of rumors and misinformation. It seems this is the role that the Health Education and Promotion Office of Iran's Ministry of Health needs to adopt as well. A few weeks after the COVID-19 pandemic in China, various rumors started to circulate around the world regarding the source of the disease and how it would be transmitted and cured. Such rumors and misinformation caused serious public anxiety and fear of food and hygiene products shortages. This event proves the occurrence of a new phenomenon called 'infodemic' as one of the features of the 21st century resulting mainly from social media development (7). Moreover, it is of crucial importance to distinguish healthcare news and information produced based on the facts by authentic sources from those produced by unprofessional, unauthentic sources published mainly by social media. Thus, the main important issue regarding COVID-19's infodemic is to prevent the spread of false or unnecessary information throughout the world (8). Healthcare systems should not only implement key emergency measures to break the COVID-19 pandemic chain and provide all the people around the world with essential public health services, but they also should do their best to control and prevent the spread of worldwide panic fueled particularly by social media. To prevent the spread of misinformation, the education sections of healthcare systems and health education experts should react quickly to

public rumors and wrong beliefs regarding COVID-19 for the sake of controlling the infodemic of the disease (9). They should also build cooperative platforms to provide people with timely warnings about rumors and worries revolving around the coronavirus disease so that public health service providers and other beneficiaries can answer people's questions in time (10). Besides, the education sections of healthcare systems can cooperate with social media to present necessary information for breaking the chain of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, our weapons to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic are nothing but social distancing and public lockdowns, so we can make use of correct information provided by social media as extra help to encourage people to stay home and observe social distancing. Indeed, there should be constant cooperation between healthcare experts and people aiming at presenting correct information via authentic networks and social media channels; therefore, the efficiency of social distancing and lockdowns against the COVID-19 disease can be assured. Accordingly, it is essential for healthcare systems to disclose correct information to increase people's media literacy and earn their trust by empowering them in a way that they can make the best decisions in terms of dealing with the disease.

Ethical issues
Not applicable.

Conflict of interests
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests.

Authors' contributions
The first author wrote the original manuscript and the other author contributed to the preparation of the manuscript's final version.

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