

The Communication at the Time of Covid 19 in Italy

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“...it seems to me that, speaking of this art, we should say things that are understandable for the uninitiated...”

Hippocrates

Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic is a dramatic experience that is stressing people of many nations. A new event about which science knows nothing or very little. For this reason, the way to communicate and give information is a delicate matter. Few and uncertain information, divergences of opinions and interpretation of data should carefully aim at avoiding faulty communication in which news transmissions become sources of confusion, alarms, and worries that in some cases may be unjustified and dangerous. In this mass media and scientists have big responsibility that should be taken into account whenever they share information.

Keywords: *Scientific Communication; Medical Practice; Public Health Information; Ethics in Medicine; Medical News*

Background

Since the end of January 2020, when Covid 19 began to enter both society and people's lives, first subtly and then with violent impetus and drama, we have witnessed a long list of physicians, nurses and healthcare workers who fell on the field because of the evident organizational unpreparedness, disorientation, and absolute lack of protection systems. All of this was coupled with long television marathons with parades of many outstanding doctors, researchers, scientists who before now nobody knew they existed. The perception was that everyone had confused ideas (understandable since it is a virus of which little or nothing is still known), some with prudent interventions, few with clear interventions and very few with common sense. Everyone concentrated the discussion on reporting daily data of mortality, the number of infected people, recommendations for hygiene, therapies used, social distances, lockdown, but no or very few words on the causes, on the influence of persons' behavioral risk factors and lifestyles, and on the possible influences of the environmental pollution and the alteration of environmental and atmospheric balance in the spread of the infection (probably due to the little knowledges available or to the complexity of the problem). In addition, in the critical period, media communication and information polarized the whole discussion on Covid 19, with very few news concerning the needs of patients with other pathologies (cardiovascular, neurological, oncological, etc.) and what they should have done in case of an acute attack, with the result that in many cases patients did not go to the hospital for fear of infection. Moreover, the lack of adequate information on these diseases contributed, for example, to an increase in home mortality due to ischemic heart disease and late hospitalization of patients with acute coronary syndrome for coronary angioplasty.

But what we were most impressed was the frequent divergence of opinions, different interpretation of the data (when it was done) and, even worse, the pretension of primogeniture of effective medical therapies and the verbal clash among professionals that fueled controversy and freed their fans on social media in a way that is highly distorted by the content with the result of a great disorientation among readers/listeners.

A show, in our opinion, not very decent for both the medical and journalistic classes, both oriented not so much to give the substance of the information, but as to make a good performance of themselves, with the final result of confusing the spectators, through comparisons and opinions several not even fully expressed. Substantially, nobody has, however, worried about the effects that such (confused and contradictory) statements and messages could have had on the audience.

Ethical considerations: Having perceived this show as a disconcerting performance of form more than of substance, pushes us to some considerations:

1. We cannot live without communicating; Just for this reason it is important to know that the perception of the message sent can be influenced by many factors, depending on which, different reactions in the recipient may be determined. Oriana Fallaci, a famous Italian writer and journalist, said that the well-known person before speaking must carefully evaluate what he is going to say due to the effects that his words may provoke as a public person (personal communication). Media should communicate the news clearly, breaking it down from personal comments that often alter the objectivity of the news itself until it seems an opinion rather than a fact. Any person who listens to the news without comment is able on his own to evaluate it according to his parameters.
2. Communicating also means transferring opinions, hypotheses, comments, doubts and anything else that is not the news but simply something subjective and personal whose content can be freely evaluated by the listener/reader as such and not as news. Personal opinions of both doctors and journalists should be supported by real data, read objectively and not interpreted according to one's personal interest (supporter action). This generates confusion and disorientation in the listener/reader and the result is a misinformation, often addressed to manipulate the user, which however has costs for the community.
3. In the context of communicative manipulation, aimed at making a show (or at increasing audience), rather than giving a correct information, through the spreading of confusing, unsafe, and often distressing messages, a subliminal sort of gaslighting (a form of manipulation in which people are pushed to look at a different reality, and, through hitting feelings, to make them lose their critical consciousness and make them convince that the truth proposed is the real truth, the only one to believe in; the aim is to attempt to destabilize persons and delegitimize their beliefs) can be easily detected. The mass communication media may be considered as an effective and powerful ideological tool that carry out a system-supportive propaganda function, by the reliance on market forces, internalized assumptions, and self-censorship, and without overt coercion [1]; the goal is what N Chomsky defined as the "consensus factory", that is, a propaganda system implemented with the mass media considered by himself to be very effective for the control and manipulation of public opinion [1,2].
4. Differences of opinion and different interpretations of scientific data by doctors and researchers should be discussed in the scientific community, within scientific events such as conferences, congresses and scientific debates, where the audience is made up of competent persons and the message remains confined within an audience however competent both for the contents and for the methods of discussion; when scientific doubts remain within the experts they generate stimuli for research not disinformation. Medical community should discuss doubts and divergences internally the scientific community, and to be united and speak with a single voice when they communicate to the general public, clearly reporting what is fully known and what little or nothing is known about it; only in this way, generating confusions, false certainties, fears and unjustified alarms could be avoided. Only in this way it is possible to earn respect and credibility from the people, only in this way it is possible to make a serious, believable and useful service to the community.

5. Medicine is not an exact science and for this reason what is communicated must be supported by the data that at that moment are more defined and certain. In the absence of certainties, the opinions should be unambiguously clear and limited to the strict meaning that the data give to avoid providing false beliefs in the listeners/readers or in any case disorientation which is one of the reasons why people turn to social media.
6. Expressions such as the magic pill or the miracle cure or found the therapy to defeat Covid19 soon, probably used as a journalistic scoop or to sell a little more copies of the newspaper or to increase the audience, should be avoided due to the false illusion or alarmism that they may cause in the readers/spectators. Medical news should be administered with caution and supported by real data putting attention to emphasize both the real effectiveness and benefit of the cure but also its side effects. Today, persons are more informed than in the past and well understand that medicine is a probabilistic science; but, in many cases they may be oriented, especially when they are touched in their needs and feelings. Scientific competence of those who report the news is necessary to talk correctly and in harmony with scientists but also to describe the news in a correct manner trying to avoid any involuntary and possibly dangerous distortion.

Conclusion

Medicine is a complex and great scientific discipline, a difficult Art, a developing Science, complicated to manage, whose professional practice has noble purposes for which it needs a high morality and, above all, love for itself and for humanity [3].

In clinical practice, the doctor must be able to combine organized knowledge (Science), application of knowledge to care (Art), taking charge of the patient's path (Management) and appropriate use of Technology, to which it does not bad to add some idealism, commitment and professionalism [4]. In addition, persons' behavior and lifestyle, environmental context and environment's respect level should be always considered and given them the right value.

In his professional practice the doctor (but also the journalist who aspires to spread scientific news) should learn to use social media with good sense and to fight fake news in medicine with rigorous and believable behavior. He should know that scientific data are to be discussed within scientist's community and that communication to the great audience must be correct, accurate and supported by valid data, being aware to avoid to give uncertain information and to avoid to be involved in a manipulation process of information that others might put in place and give news distorted by their real meaning [5]. He should be able to regain responsibility for his own work, protect both science and profession from distorted information and fake news, communicate results supported by real data, and give information in a correct way, as far as possible. All addressed to the wellbeing of the community [5].

.....before they are supplanted by any profane idiot that pretends to be a physician: the Jew, the friar, the hedgehog, the barber, the old woman; as the alchemist or the soap maker, or the custodian of the baths, or the false oculist, do as physicians. So, while many people are looking for profit, Art loses its value.... [6].

If this happens, Medicine and the noble medical profession will no longer be able to give serious reference points for Health and will lose their credibility and respectability.

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