



STATEMENT OF

VICE ADMIRAL VIVEK H. MURTHY, M.D., MBA

SURGEON GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND REFORM  
SELECT SUBCOMMITTEE ON THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

March 30, 2022

Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, members of the committee – I'm Dr. Vivek Murthy. I have the honor of serving as Surgeon General of the United States and as vice admiral of the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. Thank you for allowing me the privilege of speaking with you today.

In the last year, our government has harnessed this country's unparalleled scientific and operational capacity to make extraordinary progress in the fight against COVID-19.

We've identified and developed the tools necessary to keep people safe and out of the hospital, including vaccines, boosters, high-quality masks, and antiviral treatments. We've led and funded the production of these tools on a massive scale. And we along with state public health partners made them free-of-charge and easily accessible in every corner of the country. As a result, America has never been closer to the day where COVID no longer defines our lives.

To be sure, we haven't relegated COVID-19 to the history books. Throughout history, public health threats, from the influenza pandemic in 1918, to HIV, to the Ebola and Zika crises have taught us how important multi-year persistence is to overcoming a viral threat. We are continuing to monitor and address COVID, improve our existing tools, and develop new ones. Case counts and hospitalizations may still rise and fall, particularly as new variants emerge. And we must continue to ensure Americans at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19 receive the support they need. But the bottom line is that today, as a country, we are in a better position than at any other point in the pandemic.

The question, now, is whether or not we can keep this hard-won progress, and in fact build on it. That, in large part, will come down to the choices we each make about our health and the health of our families over the coming months and years.

That's why I want to highlight today one of the biggest ongoing threats to our public health: the extensive and dangerous spread of health misinformation.

The usefulness of any tool is dependent on whether an individual can make a fully informed decision about if, when, and how to use it. When it comes to our health, misinformation has robbed too many people of the freedom to make that fully informed decision. And over the last two years especially, we've felt it's human cost, in terms of lives lost and illness incurred.

If we fail to adequately address health misinformation now, our ability to further contain this pandemic will suffer. Our response to the next global public health emergency will be exponentially harder. The societal polarization that misinformation thrives on will be further exacerbated. And we will put the well-being of more and more families, communities, and disproportionately affected people everywhere in danger.

But we have the ability, and the responsibility, to make change happen. Last year, I released my Surgeon General's Advisory on Health Misinformation, which highlights the urgency of this crisis and outlines what it will take to address it.

The advisory includes actionable recommendations for every major sector.

Government can support community organizations and other trusted messengers working to prevent the spread of misinformation. It can fund research to help us better understand the extent and nature of

the problem, and use the full extent of its powers to help create a healthy information environment that safeguards the health and well-being of Americans.

Clinicians, meanwhile, can continue and expand their work to address misinformation directly with their patients, including by utilizing resources HHS has made available to healthcare professionals across the country, like my office's Community Toolkit for Addressing Health Misinformation. Educators can be trained to better provide people with tools for digital health literacy.

Journalists and media outlets can do more to inform the public without amplifying misinformation by providing context, using a broader range of credible sources, and avoiding sensationalism.

Technology companies also need to step up, and take responsibility for the unprecedented volume of misinformation on their sites. It's poisoning our information environment, and it's causing needless harm. These companies can start by responding to demands for transparency and by sharing data with independent researchers and the public, so that we can better understand how misinformation is spreading online and how best to address it.

Finally, we each must raise our personal bars for what we share, online and offline. We all have a platform, whether in our homes, in our communities, at our jobs, or on the internet. And we have a collective moral responsibility to be honest, fair, and accountable for what we say.

I look forward to discussing these possibilities with you today.

I want to acknowledge those who are concerned about where the line is drawn between preventing the spread of misinformation and censorship.

We are a country that prides itself on defending certain bedrock values, including freedom of speech. The values that we support and honor and cherish in America are the beacons that have drawn generations of immigrants, like my parents, to this country.

In our society, where our individual actions affect one another, the role of government is to set common rules for the common good – rules that respect and reflect our fundamental values.

That's why we banned tobacco ads that targeted kids, and in 1984, mandated warning labels on tobacco products – so that, in the face of powerful economic forces denying the dangers and promoting the use of an extremely addictive substance, the public's ability to make a fully informed decision about their health was protected.

President Reagan, the Congress, and one of my predecessors, Surgeon General Koop, understood that when we don't have honest, accurate information, then we lose the freedom to make the best decision for our health and the health of our families. The result of their actions, decades later, is a nearly unparalleled public health success story, copied the world over.

That's what we have the opportunity to do again here.

As we protect the gains we've made against COVID, and prepare for what's ahead, let's ensure all Americans have the tools, the support, and the information necessary to help keep themselves and their loved ones healthy and safe. Thank you.