

## Disinformation about COVID & India



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The Dharma Into Action Foundation held a virtual event on Sunday to address the misinformation and disinformation surrounding the virulent wave of the COVID-19 pandemic that is devastating India and its neighbors.

“The situation currently looks quite grim for India. We are projecting by September 1, 1.24 million deaths, and that is under counting the deaths in every country in the world and here in the United States. These are fathers, not a number, mothers, sons, daughters, cousins, friends, relatives. So it’s very important for all of us to pause and understand what’s going on in India and how it is devastating,” said panelist Dr. Ali Mokdad.

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The 90-minute event consisted of discussions and a Q&A with a diverse panel of experts in data science, business, media, and philanthropy. They covered topics including the current state of India, what needs to be done to flatten the curve, the media's coverage of India right now, what the United States is doing to help, and what the diaspora can do from abroad. The end of the event consisted of a conversation and Q&A with Indian Embassy officers about distribution of supplies within India.



Mokdad began by introducing the situation in India and reviewing the current statistics regarding infection rates and the new variants that have risen in the country. He said that some vaccines, such as AstraZeneca, aren't effective against the new mutations of the

^ Though it is important for the government to work with private sectors to produce vaccines, panelist and U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy said that we also have to make sure that the right information is reaching people. Misinformation about the virus, vaccines, and wearing masks has been circulating on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, and we can all do our part to combat it by making sure the information that is consumed and spread is from a reputable source.

“In a pandemic, when you’re responding, information is power. If you can get the right information to people, they can take steps to protect themselves. We can make all the masks in the world but if people are not willing to wear them because they’ve heard incorrect information, then that is highly problematic,” said Murthy.

Right now, India’s COVID-19 cases are peaking and won’t decline until September 1. However Mokdad said that what happens in India will determine the course of the pandemic globally, and that it is important for the United States to help India and other countries.

“There is potential for new variants that are coming up in India. There is a long term effect and India needs our help. This will impact global stability and we’re not safe here in the United States until everyone else is safe, until Indians are safe,” said Mokdad.

In order to suppress the spread of the new variant of the virus, panelist Dr. Gagandeep Kang said that people in India need to continue taking prevention measures such as staying at home, wearing a mask, and social distancing. Additionally, vaccination and supplies need to keep being distributed.

^ to combat this issue. Biswal said that there are also constraints on therapeutics, vaccines, and PP that need to be addressed.

“We’re also looking beyond these urgent needs to say, ‘How do we solve that larger problem?’ We need governments and businesses working together to ensure that one, production capacity is increased, two, the logistics of moving things from where they’re produced to where they’re needed are addressed, and three, working with the Indian government on distribution into those urgent, needed areas so that we’re understanding in real time where needs are being met and new needs are being discovered,” said Biswal.

Murthy also pointed out the impact of the pandemic on mental health and the importance of reaching out to family and friends in India. He said that he hopes that the pandemic will begin conversations about mental health and destigmatize it.

“India has struggled with the stigma around mental health. Stigma changes when we lead by example, when we speak up and share our stories, when we have the courage to stand up for somebody and to say ‘They are not broken because they’re struggling, but they’re going through a human experience that all of us are susceptible to.’ And so I think we have to keep this in mind as we get through this pandemic,” Murthy said.

Biswal said that people within the diaspora who want to help can do so through community support or financial contributions to local or large organizations. Murthy said that it is important for us to do our part, and that even the smallest actions can make a difference.

“We are all, in our own ways, struggling. In this moment, this is when

^emic that requires a global solution,” said Murthy.

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