

The Rt Hon Chloe Smith MP
The Department of Science, Innovation and Technology

C.c. The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP, The Department of Science, Innovation and Technology, Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay, Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and The Rt Hon Steve Barclay MP, Department of Health and Social Care

10 May 2023

Dear Secretary of State,

Harmful health misinformation and the Online Safety Bill

We are writing to ask you to support upcoming amendment number 52 that will be debated during the Online Safety Bill's Committee Stage in the House of Lords. This amendment proposes a new Clause that will place a duty on Category 1 platforms to undertake a health misinformation risk assessment, and set out a policy on their treatment of health misinformation content.

Health misinformation can harm people's physical and mental health, and delay the provision of care. There is mounting evidence on the impact that it can have, including illness and death from unsafe health interventions and communicable and vaccine-preventable diseases.

Health misinformation was a marked feature of the Covid-19 pandemic, it fuelled vaccine hesitancy and threatened to undermine the health of the nation. As we have moved out of the crisis response to Covid-19, it is important we do not lose sight of the dangers health misinformation poses.

One key way that we can protect the future of our healthcare system is to ensure that internet companies have clear policies on how they identify the harmful health misinformation that appears on their platforms, as well as consistent approaches in dealing with it. This will give users increased protections from harm, and improve the information environment and trust in the public institutions.

Health misinformation can come in many forms: dangerous alternative cancer treatments, questionable data on the risks of taking statins for heart patients, or the promotion of illegal abortion prevention medication. It can prevent parents from vaccinating their children - as we saw with the Strep A outbreak last winter. It can increase stigma and prejudice - for instance, to the LGBTQ+ community, as we saw during the MPox outbreak last summer. It can also make some people consider whether

to stop taking the medication they have been prescribed for their mental health condition.

Secretary of State, vaccines are a critical element of our healthcare infrastructure. The new generation of vaccines will cover diseases like cancer and even inherited conditions. And they continue to be our most effective weapon against pandemics. At present, we question whether the Online Safety Bill does enough to prevent the surge of harmful misinformation we saw during the Covid-19 pandemic or to protect the adoption of the next generation of vaccines?

We believe regulation via the Online Safety Bill is the best way to ensure platforms have effective and proportionate policies in place to tackle harmful health misinformation.

Amendment number 52 will ensure that internet companies take their role in protecting their users from harmful health misinformation seriously. It will protect us all now, as well as reducing the threat health misinformation poses in future crises.

With the very kindest regards,

- Full Fact
- Sir Jeremy Farrar, Chief Scientist of the World Health Organization
- Sir John Bell, Regius Professor of Medicine, Cambridge University
- Sir Clive Dix, former Chair of the Vaccines Taskforce
- Lord (Ara) Darzi, Paul Hamlyn Chair of Surgery at Imperial College London
- Dr Raj Mathur, Chair of British Fertility Society
- Dr Adrian James, President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists
- Dr Sarah Clarke President of the Royal College of Physicians
- Dr Jennifer Dixon, Chief Executive of The Health Foundation
- Dr Shankar Sridharan, Chief Clinical Information Officer, Great Ormond Street Hospital NHS Foundation Trust
- Professor Heidi Larson, Professor of Anthropology, Risk and Decision Science and Founding Director of the Vaccine Confidence Project at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
- Terrence Higgins Trust
- Royal Society for Public Health
- Royal College of GPs
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Beat
- Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists
- British Heart Foundation
- MS Society
- National AIDS Trust