Saving our children

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We have all woken up to a WhatsApp forward from that relative or friend with whom we are hardly in touch. These forwards typically tout inaccurate claims, awkward jokes or politically incorrect statements designed to stir controversy. We roll our eyes, and although we may not forward it ourselves, we do precious little to correct the inaccuracies.

There are hundreds of such messages and other "information" circulating on social media and the internet today. Much of this is due to the fact that internet usage in the country has grown exponentially in the last decade. Cheap smartphones and affordable data plans ensure that we are always connected. We now have over 450 million internet users in the country and the largest number of [Facebook](#) users in the world.

But connectivity is a double-edged sword. While on the one hand, it means we have a huge resource of information at our fingertips, on the other, with so much information available to us, it becomes difficult to sift through all of it to determine what is accurate and what is not. Often, "fake news" has serious repercussions, especially on the health of our children.

Take for instance what happened last year during the measles-rubella (MR) vaccination drive in Kerala. Myths related to the MR vaccine began to spread over WhatsApp. This led many parents to keep their children home from school so they would not be vaccinated. There were also attacks on health workers who were working to provide vaccines to children in those districts. And all of this was based on rumours that were demonstrated to be completely false.

Of course, this challenge existed before the age of social media. There have always been rumours circulating around vaccines — even when I worked on the pulse polio drive back in the 1980s. But the rumours then were usually locally contained. Now, because of the enormous reach of the internet, rumours can spread far and wide in no time, and these rumours are much harder to predict, monitor, and counter.

So, how do we tackle this phenomenon? The first step is to get the facts straight. It is a fact that immunisation is one of the most effective and affordable modern health interventions. Vaccination allowed us to eradicate smallpox, a disease that once killed millions. In 2014, polio was eliminated from India in what was a hailed as a major public health success. Vaccines save the lives of between 20 and 30 lakh children every year around the world. If we pay heed to rumours and stop vaccinating our children, diseases that were eliminated could resurface.

It is also a fact that before vaccines are rolled out, they undergo years of rigorous scientific evaluation. Only after vaccines are found to be safe and highly effective are they included in a country's national immunisation programme. We as a nation have benefited enormously from immunisation.

Recently, the Government of India has ramped up immunisation efforts through the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) and the Mission Indradhanush initiative. Since 2014, four new vaccines that protect children from potentially fatal diseases — including pneumonia and diarrhoea, the leading infectious causes of child death — have been introduced into the UIP. Mission Indradhanush has already vaccinated over 2.6 crore children, with a focus on rural and urban slums. The aim of the programme is to reach 90 per cent of children in this vast country with live-saving vaccines by the end of this year.

We need to communicate these facts clearly and effectively. Trust is the key to the success of any public health programme. Factual, evidence-based messages should come from local government, community leaders, and parents. Local leaders and families need to share the evidence with their communities, listen to and address concerns that people may have.

The media, too, has a critical role to play. If the media succumbs to the temptation of sensationalism without evidence and facts, inaccurate messages will spread further and gain credibility. The media has a solemn responsibility to report facts about immunisation in an accurate, fair, and professional manner.

And finally, as citizens, we need to step up and take a stand. Only when we, as individuals, educate ourselves on important public health issues like immunisation — and encourage others to do the same — will we be able to stop the spread of misinformation. We as parents and citizens are responsible for verifying important information related to the health of our children that we come across on WhatsApp and the internet.

When we receive that WhatsApp forward, let's all stop a minute and think. We need to ask ourselves: Is this information vetted? Are these legitimate sources? Are these messages trying to sensationalise or incite fear without using any facts? We can stop the spread of misinformation if we question what we read, and encourage others to do the same. It's our responsibility to take a stand against fake news for the success of our public health programmes. The lives of our children are at stake.