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One of the earliest examples of viral-scale pandemic misinformation is attributed to two Bakersfield doctors who said that COVID-19 had a death rate no worse than influenza, a statement that gets repeated today despite having been debunked by the nation's preeminent epidemiologists and leading health organizations.

an organization calling itself "America's Frontline Doctors," for example. The group claims there is a cure for the virus and that masks are therefore unnecessary. It was legitimized by Tea Party Patriots and former President Donald Trump, who personally promoted one of the doctors, Stella Immanuel, whose other notable theories include linking certain medical issues to people dreaming about having sex with witches and demons.

One of the earliest examples of viral-scale pandemic misinformation is attributed to two Bakersfield doctors who said that COVID-19 had a death rate no worse than influenza, a statement that gets repeated today despite having been debunked by the nation's preeminent epidemiologists and leading health organizations. (According to Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, the United State's coronavirus case fatality rate is 1.7 percent, whereas the fatality rate of the seasonal flu was 0.06 percent in 2020.)

Similarly, Hodkinson, the Canada-based doctor Enloe's Leavitt allegedly boosted, has been criticized for his inaccurate statements.

"This is the age of misinformation, and it's scary because it shows that even intelligent people can be pulled off track," Lacque said. "And it's dangerous because lives are at stake."

Locally, Butte County Public Health is tasked with educating the community on COVID-19. This includes underscoring the importance of personal safety measures.

In December, Public Health issued a press release in response to a planned demonstration outside its Chico office by people demanding that the county relax restrictions mandating closures. The department stated that while it supports people's right to protest, attendees should wear masks and social distance. Months earlier, a swarm of unmasked protesters clamoring for Chico businesses to reopen gathered outside Chico City Hall.

Despite Public Health's efforts, Butte

County has been in the state's highest ("purple") tier throughout most of the pandemic. This means that the virus is considered widespread, with a high risk of COVID infection (the threshold for the tier is more than seven new cases daily per 100,000 people and more than 8 percent positive tests county-wide). Butte County reached its highest number of new daily cases (240) on Dec. 11. However, over the past two weeks, the average number of daily confirmed new cases has dropped approximately 30 percent, from 69 per day to 49 per day.

Newly appointed county Public Health Officer Dr. Robert Bernstein said that poor national leadership under the Trump administration has exacerbated the public's misguided perception of and response to the pandemic.

Without clear guidance from the federal government, the public has relied on questionable sources, including social media, he said, rather than health professionals.

Bernstein stressed that vaccinations are the most effective way to combat the virus, and that people must continue to practice preventative measures—including wearing masks, washing their hands and avoiding gatherings—in order to protect one another.

"Unfortunately, there's a lot of vaccine hesitancy in our world today. It's part of a problem that's been going on the last four years under national leadership, using a lot of disinformation to cause fear and mislead people about what is true and not true," Bernstein said.

"I think we all should be hopeful that this change is going to work well for everybody," Bernstein added, referring to President Joseph Biden's election. "I would hope that people depend on credible, reliable, authoritative sources of information—that is the CDC, the NIH [National Institutes of Health], WHO [World Health Organization] and FDA [U.S. Food and Drug Administration], and not depend on Twitter and social media for health-seeking behavior." □