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Science and Health: The WHO' Scientific and Risk Communication Strategy to promote coronavirus vaccination

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Abstract

When the approval of the first COVID-19 vaccine (U. S. Food & Drug, 2022) - Comirnaty from the Pfizer/BioNTech consortium - was announced worldwide in mid-December 2020, health authorities mobilized to define vaccination strategies. It was necessary to promptly determine in which stages vaccination would take place and which groups would be prioritized in the process (Lewandowsky et al., 2021). At the same time, it was necessary to inform the community, since the success of vaccination plans and the achievement of the immunity necessary to control the spread of the disease depended on high rates of vaccine acceptance (Rutten et al, 2021). It therefore became crucial to plan credible, clear and transparent communication to all groups involved in the vaccination process (Omer et al., 2021), especially since the rapid development of this new vaccine also generated hesitation and resistance in the population.

Focusing on the impact that Risk and Scientific Communication issued by public health organizations has on changing societal behaviors, this research aims to analyze the key messages that World Health Organization (WHO) defined to promote the vaccination program against COVID-19. To fulfill this purpose, a qualitative study methodology was undertaken, which privileged the use of content analysis published on the WHO's Facebook and Instagram pages during the period from April 1 to August 31, 2021. In total, 62 posts were analyzed.

After the content analysis of the referred publications, we understand that the WHO privileged four key messages to implement its Risk Communication strategy. First, it sought to convey an image of credibility, using experts (scientists and doctors) to disseminate information on the subject. Second, it oriented its publications to show the population that vaccines are safe and provide protection against the virus. The third key message focused on collective responsibility and promoting equity of access to the vaccine. And finally, the WHO tried to appeal to the more emotional side, associating the success of the vaccination program with the only alternative to restore the habits and values of a pre-pandemic society.

If we compare the strategy developed by the WHO with the academics' perspective on how the message should be constructed to counter vaccine hesitancy, we find a high degree of agreement. Appealing to the responsibility of individual and collective protection; presenting, with transparency, the risks and benefits associated with the vaccine; exposing and clarifying rumors and false news that were published throughout this period; clarifying common doubts and

answering collective questions were part of WHO's communication throughout the analyzed period.

The conclusion of this study is that, although equity of access to the vaccine is still a reality under construction, the near 70% of the world's population vaccinated suggests that the messages sent by the WHO in the context of Risk Communication may have contributed to building a positive image of the vaccination program.

Key Words

Health, Risk Communication, Science Communication, Vaccination, COVID-19, WHO.