

Fact Checking Assignment: Debunking the Use of Hydroxychloroquine to Treat and Reduce
Death Rate of COVID-19

Mary Kate Tracy and Latifa Al-Neama

Northwestern University

COMM ST 303: Communication & Misinformation

Date Submitted: 1/23/2023

Throughout the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, death tolls were rising and doctors were seeking to find alternatives to successfully reduce the deaths caused by COVID-19. This uncertainty and fear resulted in people searching for solutions to increase their safety and health. This resulted in a plethora of misinformation about kinds of treatments that were actually effective. One potential treatment included using Hydroxychloroquine, a drug traditionally used to treat malaria, lupus, and rheumatoid arthritis (FDA 2020), to reduce the effects of COVID-19. In July 2020, CBN news published an article titled “Hydroxychloroquine Study Finds the Drug ‘Significantly’ Cuts Death Rate”, that cites a study from the Henry Ford Health System in Michigan that claims the “Treatment with hydroxychloroquine cut the death rate significantly in sick patients hospitalized with COVID-19 - and without heart-related side-effects”(Gill 2020). However, further research from the FDA demonstrates that this claim is misinformation.

Following the expert source of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), they revealed that the potential benefits of hydroxychloroquine do not outweigh its potential risks. At the start of the pandemic, the FDA had an Emergency Use Authorization (EUA) that allowed for the immediate use of chloroquine phosphate and hydroxychloroquine sulfate donated to the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS) to treat certain hospitalized patients with COVID-19 when a clinical trial was unavailable or participation in a clinical trial was not feasible (FDA 2020). However, the FDA ran a series of trials revealing serious side effects of this use. They reported serious heart rhythm problems and other safety issues such as blood and lymph system disorders, kidney injuries, and liver problems and failure (FDA 2020). Further, they found that the suggested dosing for these drugs are unlikely to produce an antiviral effect. On June 15, 2020 the FDA revoked this Emergency Use Authorization, concluding that the unknown benefits of this drug did not outweigh the resulting risks (FDA 2020). Further, on June 16th, in coordination

with the FDA, Federal COVID-19 Treatment Guidelines Panel recommended against the use of hydroxychloroquine to treat COVID-19 (CDC 2020).

When analyzing the credible sources with the CBN news article, this highlights the spread of misinformation. The article was published on July 3, 2020, approximately one month after the CDC and FDA recommended against the use of this drug to combat COVID-19. The article cites different inaccurate studies that directly contradicts the FDA's findings (FDA 2020). Therefore, this article highlights the dangers in spreading misinformation. Because the drug was initially thought of as a useful remedy for COVID-19 in a time of crisis, this misinformation could be categorized by the PolitiFact's rating system as mostly false. It presents outdated information that is not consistent with the most recent studies and findings. In addition, this statement contains an element of truth in that this drug was thought of as helpful for reducing the impact in those vulnerable to COVID-19. However, the information ignores the critical fact that this use has since been recalled and debunked due to further research and revealed side effects. This demonstrates the importance of seeking expert advice and research when dealing with a crisis such as a global pandemic and understanding the entire impact of different treatments before jumping to conclusions.

References

- Bull-Otterson L, Gray EB, Budnitz DS, et al. Hydroxychloroquine and Chloroquine Prescribing Patterns by Provider Specialty Following Initial Reports of Potential Benefit for COVID-19 Treatment — United States, January–June 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1210–1215. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6935a4>.
- FDA. (2020). FDA cautions against use of hydroxychloroquine or chloroquine for COVID-19 outside of the hospital setting or a clinical trial due to risk of heart rhythm problems. FDA.
<https://www.fda.gov/drugs/drug-safety-and-availability/fda-cautions-against-use-hydroxy-chloroquine-or-chloroquine-covid-19-outside-hospital-setting-or>
- FDA. (2020, June 16). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Update: FDA Revokes Emergency Use Authorization for Chloroquine and Hydroxychloroquine*. FDA.
<https://www.fda.gov/news-events/press-announcements/coronavirus-covid-19-update-fda-revokes-emergency-use-authorization-chloroquine-and>
- Gill, B. (2020, July 3). *Hydroxychloroquine Study Finds the Drug “Significantly” Cuts Death Rate*. CBN News.
<https://www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/us/2020/july/new-hydroxychloroquine-study-proves-trump-right-says-it-significantly-cuts-death-rate>