

MEDIA RELEASE

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Unchecked misinformation risks Australia's vaccine response

A newly formed coalition of health and technology experts is calling on the Australian Parliament to force Big Tech companies to reveal the true extent of COVID-19 misinformation.

In a [letter sent to the Australian Parliament today](#), the coalition warns unchecked misinformation risks Australia's COVID-19 vaccination efforts.

They have called on politicians to introduce a [Big Tech 'Live List'](#), which details the most popular coronavirus-related material being shared online.

The coalition, led by [Reset Australia](#), includes the [Immunisation Coalition](#), the [Immunisation Foundation of Australia](#), [Coronavax](#) and the [Doherty Institute](#).

"Rampant misinformation on social media is hampering Australia's COVID-19 efforts and may deter widespread take up of the future vaccine," said Chris Cooper, executive director of Reset Australia, the local affiliate of the global initiative working to counter digital threats to democracy and society.

"Social media has supercharged conspiracy theories and misinformation, pushing some people into echo chambers where false information is all they see."

The letter details how public health officials, academics and journalists could use the Live List to track and trace misinformation. Currently the extent of the problem is hidden from view, which hampers public education efforts, says Kim Sampson, from the Immunisation Coalition.

"Campaigns that educate and inform the public are a key part of this mission but the level of misinformation out there creates a huge barrier," said Mr Sampson. "Understanding who is being targeted and what kind of lies they're being fed would help us relieve community concerns and fears."

Catherine Hughes, from the Immunisation Foundation of Australia, knows firsthand how easily parents can be manipulated by anti-vaxxers playing on parents' fears.

Her own son Riley died from whopping cough when he was just 32 days old and too young to be vaccinated. Since his death she has successfully lobbied for pregnant women to have the whopping cough vaccine - but this has made her a target for anti-vaxxers online.

"Vaccine misinformation costs lives," Ms Hughes said. "I've spoken with heartbroken parents who chose not to vaccinate their children after being scared by online misinformation, only to have their children die or suffer serious consequences from a vaccine-preventable disease."

"This misinformation flourishes on social media, where fear translates quickly into clicks and shares. It is vital COVID misinformation is able to be tracked, and not hidden, so experts have a chance at

countering some of the most dangerous myths being perpetuated."

Public health experts fear if Covid misinformation is left unchecked it will hamper the mass vaccination effort. They also believe social media could be a powerful tool to tackle the problem, once the spread of misinformation is better understood.

Dr Tael Harper is part of the Coronavax program which is working to understand community concerns about the vaccine.

"Social media has changed the way we communicate with our loved ones, but also broader society," Dr Harper said. "We are only just beginning to appreciate how these platforms can be manipulated and the impact that can have on public discourse. With more transparency we can begin to tackle some of the unintentional harms and side effects of social media."

Ultimately, the coalition wants to see Big Tech platforms be held accountable for the social harms they cause.

"Regardless of how we use social media, or whether we use it at all – we are all affected by the current lack of accountability," said Mr Cooper.

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