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NEWS

Why won't a debunked conspiracy theory about doctors harmed by the COVID vaccine go away?

The idea that dozens of Canadian MDs have died of the vaccine isn't true, say their families and experts, but the idea has serious traction online.

On the third Sunday of July, a Toronto ear specialist and devoted father of three died after a “ridiculously unfair” bout of lung cancer, according to

his obituary.

By Alex Boyd Toronto Star

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Tim Caulfield, the Canada Research Chair in health, law and policy at the University of Alberta, said it's "amazing" how the doctor conspiracy lives on as "it was immediately debunked." – Kelvin Li

On the third Sunday of July, a Toronto ear specialist and devoted father of three died after a “ridiculously unfair” bout of lung cancer, according to his obituary.

The next day, a longtime neurologist who loved literature, classical music and the outdoors also died of cancer. The third doctor to die that week had a passion for pain medicine, and had just welcomed a son when he died of an aggressive form of stomach cancer, according to news reports.

All three worked at Trillium Health Partners, a hospital system in Mississauga and Etobicoke, which released a statement online about the “deep sadness” of mourning three colleagues at once. But, unusually, the statement went one step further: “The rumour circulating on social media is simply not true,” it said.

“Their passings were not related to the COVID-19 vaccine.”

The cluster of deaths back in the summer helped kindle what is now a fire — a conspiracy theory that today peddles a list of dozens of doctors online, including the three who died in July, as well as — according to its own descriptions — several who drowned, one who was in the middle of biking 105 kilometres and a doctor who died coming down K2, a mountain deadlier than Everest.

The list has enraged many of their surviving family members and colleagues. It's also demonstrated just how hard it can be to quash misinformation in the pockets of the internet where regulation is thin and bad actors flourish.

"It's in my social media feed almost every day, if not every day. My hate mailers are emailing to me," says Tim Caulfield, the Canada Research Chair in health, law and policy at the University of Alberta who works on misinformation.

"One of the things that is fascinating is it was immediately debunked, in the sense of 'No, this is wrong, *this* is actually how these individuals passed away.' But that didn't kill the story.

"It's amazing how it won't die — and it's amazing the impact it continues to have."

A widely shared Facebook post in the days after the three died showed pictures of the doctors and implored people to help circulate its message of caution: "How many times have 3 doctors died in 1 week, days after the hospital started administering the 4th shot to staff," the message reads.

"How many more 'coincidences' will people accept. These shots need to be pulled."

Versions of that same message — some identical, some worded differently but echoing the conspiracy theory that the deaths were no mere coincidence — flooded social media.

To be clear, experts are united on the fact that this is a conspiracy theory. The causes of death were well documented by family in news stories and obituaries. It's not clear when they were vaccinated, and, besides which, their symptoms do not match what we know about vaccine side effects from studies on millions of people.

Millions of COVID vaccines have been administered in Canada, and billions around the world. Studies show the shot is overwhelmingly safe and effective, and serious side-effects exceedingly rare. So far, a coroner in Ontario included a blood clot related to vaccination in one person's cause of death, and 50 cases of death that happened after vaccination are under investigation at the federal level.

Still, by late July and early August the conspiracy theory had become so prevalent that media organizations had stepped in to debunk it by pointing out the real reasons these doctors died. That includes American outlets such as [USA Today](#) and the international wire service [Reuters](#).

Providing credible information to counter conspiracy theories is still important for those people who haven't subscribed to them and are genuinely seeking information, Caulfield says.

But debunking doesn't necessarily sway those who are already on board with misinformation, he notes.

Conspiracy theories are increasingly self-sealing, he says, in that any attempt to correct them just reinforces them for core believers. For example, when health officials offer the real reason these doctors died, for some, it just becomes more evidence that the medical system is corrupt, he says.

The fact that the death of doctors fits nicely with other myths about the health system makes this a particularly potent bit of misinformation, says Dr. Michelle Cohen, a family doctor in Brighton, Ont., who has been tracking the advance of the theory since summer.

If you already believe that doctors are lying about the safety of vaccines, there is a "dark joy" in the idea that those same health-care providers are being harmed, she argues.

"Then also, seeing doctors as victims of their own hubris or as victims of the system (makes people wonder) how the rest of us can meet the challenge against these dark globalist forces," she adds.

The fact that major digital players have made real efforts to quash misinformation has shifted the landscape when it comes to conspiracy theories. For most people, a quick Google search for Toronto doctors who died of the COVID vaccine will yield a menu of stories fact-checking the viral theory, but that has worked to push some of these ideas into less well-known corners of the internet or prompted the creation of new disguises.

Anti-vaccine messaging is more easily searchable on newer platforms such as Telegram, TikTok and Gettr.

It also lingers on Facebook, where some users have taken pains to evade efforts to stamp out misinformation. For example, the death of doctors has piggybacked on an existing conspiracy theory, Cohen says, which is that anyone who died suddenly may have been a victim of the vaccine.

There are Facebook groups devoted to the idea — many of which have been created or grown in recent months — but which use coded language to disguise their intent, using euphemisms for the vaccine such as cupcake or juice.

One such private group named Died Suddenly Worldwide — created at the end of August, it now has more than 20,000 members who discuss why they think people they know were harmed by vaccines — even includes in its rules that members must use

different code words. (Which at least one member seems to find confusing, wondering in a recent post why everyone couldn't just pick one term and stick with it — “Good heavens! It's stressful to try to decode.”)

But the idea that doctors are dying has also been boosted by high-profile figures, too, including some outside the country.

In August, American tech millionaire turned anti-vaccination advocate Steve Kirsch wrote about “14 young Canadian docs” who died after getting a shot. (The number of doctors has grown over time.)

Weeks later, a video from American radio personality Stew Peters claimed that “hundreds” of Canadian doctors had died. “Doctors are dropping like flies in Canada,” reads a post viewed almost 190,000 times.

Peters has a film out later this month that claims to explore all the people who have died following vaccination. The trailer includes, among other things, clips of pop artists Justin Bieber, who has recently suffered some facial paralysis as a result of Ramsay Hunt syndrome, which doctors say is unrelated to vaccination, and Katy Perry, who recently described an on-stage twitch as her “broken doll eye party trick.”

This fall, the torch was picked up here again by William Makis, a doctor living in Alberta who is no longer practising. In a letter to the Canadian Medical Association, Makis noted what he described as sudden or unexpected deaths of Canadian doctors “since the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines” and raised concerns about the COVID vaccines and mandates “contributing” to the deaths.

“All Canadian medical students and residents were forced into unscientific, unethical, cruel and harmful COVID-19 vaccine mandates,” he wrote in the letter, ending with a request for the CMA to immediately “halt to all COVID-19 vaccine mandates in Canadian healthcare.” In an email in response to this story, Makis said he never said the doctors died of the vaccine.

The CMA does not note a connection between vaccines and sudden deaths.

“There is no evidence to confirm or support the various theories that have been circulated,” the CMA said in an email.

The organization “is concerned with misinformation and conspiracy theories spreading online about the recent deaths of physicians across the country.

Still, anti-vaccination publications such as The Epoch Times, Bright Light News and the Western Standard have picked up the story.

According to a recent Epoch Times story — an anti-China publication associated with Falun Gong — Makis has declined to provide his full database but made his calculation based on notes about deaths on the websites of medical associations, including the

Canadian Medical Association.

Cohen says that after over two years spent battling a pandemic, it's hard to see her colleagues being used to discredit a medical intervention that has saved lives. As misinformation about COVID continues to circulate, it's particularly tough on doctors to see one that targets their own.

“To be taking photos and words about someone’s life that was submitted by their family member to an obituary service to honour them? And spewing it out everywhere across all of these disinformation networks?”

“I think it’s absolutely disgusting.”

Clarification — Nov. 8, 2022: *This file was updated with more detail about the letter William Makis sent to Canadian Medical Association, which suggested that COVID vaccines and mandates contributed to the sudden deaths of doctors.*

Alex Boyd is a Calgary-based reporter for the Star. Follow her on Twitter:

@alex_n_boyd

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