

## Correspondence

# Conspiracies and the nocebo effect during the COVID-19 pandemic

Last June 2021, the editors discussed ‘conspiracy theorists and naysayers’.<sup>1</sup> It was later succeeded by an in-depth correspondence that underscored adverse outcomes and greater anxiety levels when conspiracy and disinformation beliefs are present.<sup>2</sup> Pandemics have a negative impact on a person’s well-being, which may cause psychological and physiological distress.<sup>3</sup> That being pointed out, in the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the possibility of an enhanced nocebo effect occurring is much higher. This scenario is further made worse by people’s sense of powerlessness in the face of a new set of circumstances, a perceived high contagion risk, a dearth of knowledge to use, a lack of effective cures or vaccinations and an increased supply of negative news.<sup>4</sup>

The nocebo effect is used to characterize unfavorable health consequences claimed by patients after they are exposed to seemingly innocuous new technologies or stimuli which they feel are likely to trigger symptoms or be harmful to their health. Studies have demonstrated that when individuals predict poor outcomes, they negatively affect treatment outcomes,<sup>5</sup> which can unfavorably affect people’s perception toward vaccinations and other health measures. Included in the COVID-19 pandemic is a negative situation that strong nocebo effects might fuel. In addition to verbal information and recommendations, a person’s environment, such as reading unfavorable media campaigns, can influence the nocebo effect.<sup>6</sup> One of the most significant stressors of the present pandemic is uncertainty and environmental and activity changes. These stresses frequently lead to opposing ideas and expectations. Information in this approach floods individuals with dramatic and usually negative information because of social networks and media. They provide information that is contradictory and unclear, which is reinforced by conspiracy theories and hoaxes. The information presented in these news sources might create an environment conducive to mental illness and place an extraordinary strain on the people who encounter it. It is crucial to understand that stress is connected with misleading information.<sup>7</sup>

A positive understanding of and reduced expectations of infection are critical to decreasing psychological suffering after and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of probable

nocebo effects, it should be stressed how individuals may mitigate the adverse impacts of messages and communication flows by translating them into neutral or positive information. Make progress in the field of new medicines and vaccine innovations is always an excellent way to go about having supportive expectations. There should be a goal of increased balance in positive and negative information, emphasizing prevention and prognosis<sup>7</sup> and promoting discussions on dangers in public health emergencies by employing social media literacy that rigorously scrutinizes conspiratorial thinking.<sup>8</sup> Based on the details presented, to diminish both the perils of conspiracies and the nocebo effect requires a synergistic action both from government agencies, through effective information circulation strategies, and a cognizant citizenry.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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