

[OPINION] Why saying 'trust the science' is part of the problem

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'Health communication is more productive with familiar and relatable faces. A barangay health worker, yes. A DOH official, no.'

One of the regrettable responses to vaccine-hesitant Filipinos is the way their fears or doubts are characterized as poor information that requires correction. They're told to be discerning, especially on social media, and to be mindful of misinformation. They're reminded to trust the

medical facts. It has become a catechism. But these repeated assurances from government officials and public health experts exacerbate a problem that has been largely overlooked — that knowing the scientific evidence does not necessarily change behavior.

Filipinos refusing the vaccine is concerning, but the “trust the science” retort is just as disappointing. We need to reach as many people as possible with the correct information, they say. We should make Filipinos understand that the vaccine is safe and effective, they urge. We need experts to lecture in webinars. We need explications through “Frequently Asked Questions” pubmats on social media.

This zeal to educate “the masses” is a long-held comfort zone. In the 1930s, so-called correct information dominated public health interventions of the Philippine Health Service. Dr Jacobo Fajardo and later Dr Jose Fabella insisted that the success of health depended on reeducating Filipinos about the rudiments of sanitation, hygiene, and their peculiar habits. Changing these, according to Dr Fajardo, “can be accomplished by one means — education.”

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