

Washington Medical Board Charges Doctor for Spreading COVID Misinformation

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Misinformation regarding COVID-19 has been cited as a public health threat since the beginning of the worldwide pandemic. Doctors and professional organizations are standing guard, hoping to protect patients from any harm that results from mistruths spread by colleagues.



Case in point: Several physicians and the American Board of Pathology [filed complaints](#) with Washington and Idaho medical boards alleging that Ryan Cole, MD, a board-certified pathologist who practices in Boise, Idaho, but who also holds a license in Washington, has spread anti-vaccine and pro-ivermectin statements on social media. Cole is one of the founders of America's Frontline Doctors, a right-wing political organization. Cole did not respond to a Medscape request for comment.

Gary W. Procop, MD, CEO, American Board of Pathology told *Medscape Medical News* that "as physicians and board-certified pathologists, we have a public trust, and we must be accountable to patients, society, and the profession. Misinformation can cause real harm to patients, which may include death. Misinformation diverts patients away from lifesaving vaccination and other preventive measures, promotes viral transmission, and recommends ineffective therapies that may be toxic instead of evidence-based medical care."

Cavalcade of Complaints

Several doctors also chimed in with formal complaints alleging that Cole is spreading unreliable information, according to [a report](#) from KTVB News. For example, a Boise doctor wrote in his complaint that Cole is "a major purveyor of misinformation" and called it "amazing" that the physician was continuing to publicly support debunked information about COVID-19 more than a year into the pandemic. The doctor also stated, "Cole is a health menace, abusing his status as a physician to mislead the public."

As a result of such complaints, the Washington [medical board has charged Cole](#) with COVID-19-related violations. It is unclear whether or not the Idaho medical board will sanction the doctor. At least [12 medical boards have sanctioned doctors](#) for similar violations since the start of the pandemic.

The statement of charges from the Washington medical board contends that since March 2021, Cole has made numerous misleading statements regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, vaccines, the use of [ivermectin](#) to treat COVID-19, and the effectiveness of masks.

In addition, the statement alleges that Cole treated several COVID-19 patients via telemedicine. During these sessions, he prescribed ivermectin, an antiparasite drug that has not been found to have any effectiveness in treating, curing, or preventing COVID-19. One of the patients died after receiving this treatment, according to the complaint.

Citing [a study](#) published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Procop pointed out that use of ivermectin, which is not approved by the US Food and Drug Administration to treat COVID-19, is particularly troubling.

"There is a concern whenever an ineffective treatment is prescribed when more effective and scientifically proven therapies are available. Therapeutics have potential side effects, and toxicities have been associated with the use of ivermectin," Procop said.

"The benefits of therapy should always outweigh the risks of treatment."

If the Washington medical board finds that Cole has engaged in unprofessional conduct, possible sanctions include revocation or suspension of his license. [Washington state law also provides](#) for a range of other possible sanctions, including restriction or limitation of his practice, requiring that he complete a specific program of remedial education or treatment, monitoring of his practice, censure or reprimand, probation, a fine of up to \$5000 for each violation, or refunding fees that his practice has billed to and collected from patients. Cole has until January 30 to respond to the medical board's statement.

"The American Board of Pathology supports the actions of the Washington State Medical Board regarding their inquiries into any physician that holds license in their State who makes false and misleading medical claims, or provides medical care beyond their scope of practice, as indicated by their training," Procop said.

Law in Limbo

While medical boards are seeking to sanction professionals who spread falsehoods, the pause button has been hit on the California law that allows regulators to punish doctors for spreading false information about COVID-19 vaccinations and treatments.

The [law](#) went into effect January 1 but was temporarily halted when US District Senior Judge William B. Shubb of the Eastern District of California granted a preliminary injunction against the law on January 25, according to [a report](#) in the *Sacramento Bee*.

Shubb said the measure's definition of "misinformation" was "unconstitutionally vague" under the due process clause of the 14th Amendment. He also criticized the law's definition of "misinformation" as being "grammatically incoherent."

John McCormack is a Riverside, Illinois–based freelance writer covering healthcare information technology, policy, and clinical care issues.

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