



Together with my fellow patrons Chancellor Olaf Scholz and President Emmanuel Macron, I am honored to welcome you to the 2024 World Health Summit. WHO is grateful to Germany for its hospitality, and for its strong support for WHO and global health. I am also deeply grateful to Chancellor Scholz for agreeing to host a pledging event, together with France and Norway, for the WHO Investment Round as part of this year's Summit.

The theme of this year's Summit, "Building Trust for a Healthier World" could not be more apposite. Trust has always been the foundation of medicine and public health. We cannot all be doctors, nurses, pharmacists or epidemiologists; we trust those who are to advise us on how to promote and protect our own

health, and that of those we love. When trust breaks down, the consequences for health can be catastrophic, for individuals, families, communities, societies, economies and nations.

Sometimes trust is eroded and broken by unsafe care, whether because of medical malpractice, human error, or because the health facilities in which people seek care lack clean water, sanitation, electricity, skilled health workers or essential medicines. In these situations, the loss of trust is due to real events or circumstances, and can often be remedied by addressing those circumstances with more training, investments and addressing systemic weaknesses.

Trust is much harder to retain or regain when it is broken by mis- or disinformation: incorrect or incomplete information, rumors, conspiracy theories, or plain falsehoods. In these situations, it is the lack of trust itself that causes harm: people do not take steps recommended by health professionals to protect themselves, or treat themselves with unsafe or unproven products.

This is not a new phenomenon. Mis- and disinformation has long undermined medicine in public health. "Vaccine hesitancy" began shortly after vaccination itself. Dr Alexander Milton Ross campaigned against smallpox vaccination in Canada in the 19th century, on the mistaken assertion that the disease was caused by uncleanness and could be prevented with hygiene and isolation. More recently, unfounded and disproven claims that vaccines cause autism have contributed to a decline in vaccination rates and the return of preventable diseases like measles.

Mis- and disinformation has also fuelled stigma and discrimination against people with HIV, tuberculosis, mental health conditions, leprosy, mpox and more, leading to social isolation, preventing people seeking the care they need and even driving transmission. In some cases, it has led to violence against health care workers, individuals, or vulnerable groups such as minorities or refugees.

Of course, the COVID-19 pandemic is the most extreme example of our time.

Falsehoods about masks, vaccines, and "lockdowns" spread as fast as the virus itself, and were almost as deadly. Some people did themselves harm based on falsehoods, self-medicating with toxic chemicals or dangerous medications. Others did not take the precautions they should have.

Mis- and disinformation is also undermining negotiations of the WHO Pandemic Agreement, with false claims spread by media, celebrities, social media influencers and even some politicians that the Agreement will cede national sovereignty to WHO and give it the power to impose "lockdowns" or vaccine mandates on countries. These claims are, of course, entirely false and endanger global health by jeopardising a much-needed legal instrument to ensure a more coordinated and more equitable response to future pandemics.

The ongoing mpox emergency is another reminder of the ever-present threat of outbreaks, epidemics and pandemics that require a coordinated international response. But so too do the many other threats to health that transcend borders,

from antimicrobial resistance to soaring rates of noncommunicable diseases, fuelled in part by global industries that profit from products that harm health. Meeting these multiple overlapping challenges is a daunting task, made even more so by the proliferation of mis- and disinformation.

Rising to this challenge makes it essential that we work to understand the reasons people believe mis- and disinformation, so we can work to regain and retain their trust. This year's World Health Summit is an important opportunity to do just that.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "T" and "A".

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus
Director-General of the
World Health Organization (WHO)