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INTRODUCTION

As the SARS-CoV-2 viral infection spread to pandemic levels in March 2020, there was an immediate impact on academic activities, including the dissemination of new information which was normally presented through academic meetings such as in-person continuing education sessions.

Campus and social lockdowns led to an abrupt move in the tools used for the transmission and dissemination of evidence-based facts. The truncated social interactions involving students, staff and practitioners led to a greater reliance on social media. Social media presented a cacophony of science, myths and realities. A solution to this academically challenging situation comprising the presentation and interpretation of data, complicated with the publication of pre-prints, was through the organisation of webinars intended for the sharing of experiences.¹

AIMS

- ❖ To develop webinars presenting scientific evidence and reflections on the challenges in navigating the science, myths and realities of COVID-19 pandemic.
- ❖ To develop an inter-professional dimension to the discussion by analysing current research, practices and applications proposed by institutions within the international scenario.

Acknowledgement: Panel members from the Department of Pharmacy, the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery and Socio-Economic leaders

METHOD

- A number of webinars were presented every week between March and July.
- Each webinar had a duration of 45 minutes with 15 minutes discussion.
- Each webinar was led by an academic pharmacist from the University of Malta.
- For each webinar, a panel of experts was invited including virologists, immunologists, specialists in infectious disease, internal medicine and intensive care, pharmaceutical and public health regulators. In addition to these there were occasional invitations to politicians, economists, trade unionists, employers and ethicists to address and answer questions from the participants.

RESULTS

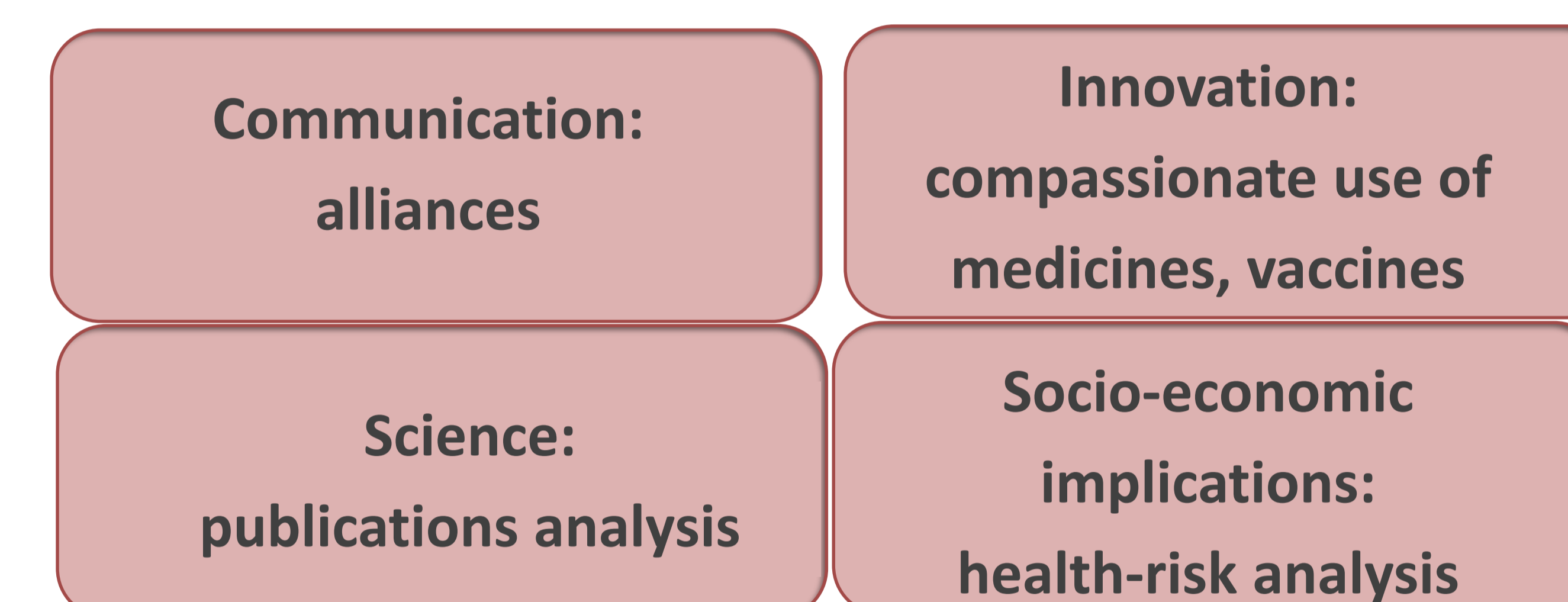
- 15 webinars were presented covering topics such as infection control, re-positioning of medicines, laboratory investigations and socio-economic implications (Table 1).
- An average of 250 participated in each webinar. Participants included pharmacists, physicians, healthcare professionals, scientists, pharmacy regulators, administrators, policy makers and students from different areas. Participants represented 20 countries from Europe, Africa, Asia and United States.

Table 1: Topics of the webinar sessions

Pathology and presentation of infection
Compassionate use of medicines
Clinical trials
Medical devices
Testing and interpretation
Public health containment measures
Race to the vaccine
Affordability crisis, lockdown, health and well-being
Dynamics of predisposition
CRISPR RNA in antiviral defense
Evidence for treatment
Risk, correlation and causality
Vaccines: The good, the bad and the ugly
Improvisation, optimization, addressing bureaucracy and spurring science
Strategy, thinking fast and slow, health and freakonomics, risk policies and lessons learnt

The outcomes of the webinars were thematically grouped into four areas by a panel of expert members. In evaluating the webinars, participants pointed to the following beneficial outcomes: a platform for communication, critical analysis of scientific publications, focus on innovation, and reflections on a balance between socio-economic and health needs (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Outcomes of the webinar



CONCLUSION

Webinars, in this time of the pandemic, served a good purpose to disseminate information and as a discussion platform amongst healthcare professionals from different areas and countries. Academic pharmacists proved fitting to co-ordinate and lead such multidisciplinary webinars. A particular input to these webinars was the contribution of professionals other than health such as economists and sociologists during the discussion. The nature of the webinars provided a window towards reaching a balance between basic social and economic of a population as related to the supremacy of health exigencies. This study also showed how one can tackle myths by presenting realities and how to apply basic scientific principles to a practical and realistic scenario such as a pandemic. This scenario could serve as an example of how to apply science to today's pharmacy practice.

REFERENCE

1. Azzopardi LM, Serracino-Ingloft A. An inter-professional approach towards understanding the science, myths and realities of COVID19 pandemic. Pharmacy Education 2020 (2): 33-34.