How physicians can boost COVID-19 vaccination at local level

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COVID-19 vaccines are here. And while there are challenges to getting them in the arms of millions of people, these can be overcome by working together, according to experts speaking at the annual AMA State Advocacy Summit, held virtually this year because of the pandemic.

"We can do this. We have to the ability to do it," said Michael J. Darrouzet, executive vice president and CEO of the Texas Medical Association. "This is our generation's time to step up and handle this just as our predecessors handled the polio crisis."

Darrouzet was part of a panel of experts assembled to discuss the state of COVID-19 vaccine distribution and what physicians need to know.

The program was held prior to President Joe Biden announced his goal of getting 100 million people vaccinated in 100 days and the panel focused on distribution, ensuring equitable administration of the vaccines, building trust and the role of physicians in immunizing the U.S. population were all brought up in a lively conversation fueled by audience questions.

Learn more with the AMA about COVID-19 and vaccine development.

Building trust is job one

"Building the public trust starts with us," said AMA President Susan R. Bailey, MD, who moderated the panel.

"We must continue the work to ensure our patients understand that they [vaccines] are safe and effective," Dr. Bailey said, adding that this includes emphasizing the rigorous, evidence-based safeguards that are part of the vaccine-development process.
She acknowledged that there is some public skepticism about the vaccines and some of this due to long-term structural health inequities.

"We need to confront skepticism and criticism with science and evidence—but also understanding and compassion," Dr. Bailey said.

Helene D. Gayle, MD, president and CEO of the Chicago Community Trust, noted that equity must be included in the distribution equation, which means "prioritizing communities that have been unduly burdened" by the pandemic and taking into consideration factors that have put people at higher risk for COVID-19.

"It’s the first time equity has been front and center in title and design" of a vaccine rollout, she said.

The AMA is taking part in an Ad Council video series that answers health professionals' COVID-19 vaccination questions.

How physicians can help

Claire Hannan, MPH, executive director of the Association of Immunization Managers, said there are several ways individual physicians can help support the vaccination effort.

These include getting vaccinated themselves, recommending vaccinations to their patients, and enrolling as a vaccine provider, either at their own facility or centralized local institution.

"Look for ways to be part of the solution," she said.

Anita Patel, PharmD, with the CDC's COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force, said there are tools available to help with promotion and vaccine follow-up. These include "I Got Vaccinated" pins to celebrate patients' decision to get vaccinated and smartphone survey apps to monitor for adverse reactions and to send reminders for the second vaccine dose.

Darrouzet spoke to the importance of physicians being on his state's vaccine advisory committee. He described how it helps doctors get a look at the state decision-making process and keeping them informed on the state's COVID-19 hotspots, advance word on where the next doses are going, and where they will be stored.

They can then share this information with their local health officials and news media to help with communication and transparency.

Darrouzet encouraged medical societies to survey their members to identify gaps in distribution and
to work with state hospital associations to fill them. He also suggested working with state health officials to stage large-scale vaccination events, and—just as medical societies helped nonhospital-based physicians to get personal protection equipment—they must now extend the same effort to get independent practitioners and their staffs vaccinated.

The TMA is also working on a vaccine "myth busters" campaign and working with the state to get vaccines distributed in rural areas, Darrouzet said.

The AMA has developed documents to answer frequently asked questions about COVID-19 vaccination: one is aimed at physicians, and other addresses patient queries.

**Legislators need direction**

Hannan encouraged physicians to work with their legislators to help focus any actions they may take.

"We always see state legislators wanting to get involved," she explained, adding that physicians can help ensure that this desire to help is activated productively by identifying where legislative or policy changes are needed.

Patel noted that the CDC is not looking at "mass vaccination, but vaccination of the masses over time," adding that what's needed is not an "all-government" approach, but an "all-of-society" approach with much assistance from the physician community.

Even as excitement grows over the prospect of vaccines "breaking the back of the pandemic," Dr. Gayle said people must be reminded to continue to "think about this holistically," meaning continue to wear masks, frequently wash hands and maintain a safe physical distance.