

Dr. Bailey to Senate: Doctors are nation's best vaccine ambassadors

JUN 25, 2021

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The need for tailored messages delivered from trusted sources of information—along with convenient access—are seen as keys to overcoming COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, experts told U.S. senators at an in-person hearing of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

The first witness senators heard from was AMA Immediate Past President Susan R. Bailey, MD, who told them about the important role physicians can play in answering patients' questions and addressing their fears about vaccinations.

"It makes a big difference to be able to talk to patients face to face about their vaccine concerns and answer questions and be able to vaccinate them while they are on site in the office for an appointment," Dr. Bailey said in her statement for the record. "That is why we have urged, and continue to urge, that vaccines be distributed to physician offices."

Physicians have also been leading by example, Dr. Bailey said, citing a recent AMA survey that found 96% of practicing physicians have been fully vaccinated and, of those who aren't, 45% intend to be.

"Physicians have a critical role as trusted ambassadors in the current vaccination campaign, and the AMA has helped prepare our members to be ready and able to educate their patients and the public to reduce vaccine hesitancy and refusal," Dr. Bailey said.

Nearly 56% of Americans are fully vaccinated against SARS-CoV-2, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There are wide variations in COVID-19 vaccination by location, race, ethnicity and age.

The AMA has developed free resources on its website that are available to address the concerns of physicians and to help answer their patients' questions and has urged federal agencies to be as transparent as possible about vaccine development and clinical trial data.

"The AMA is also encouraging all state and medical specialty members to help involve their members

in efforts to increase COVID-19 vaccination rates and ensure COVID-19 vaccination is equitable,” Dr. Bailey said.

“Concern over access—especially equitable distribution and availability—to the COVID-19 vaccines has been a top AMA concern,” she added. “Preventing racial disparities in the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines has been, and continues to be, critical to mitigate the disproportionate impacts of the virus for people of color and prevent widening racial health disparities going forward.”

AMA member Michelle Nichols, MD, also spoke. She told senators about the importance of “modelling” and how she tells patients why she received the COVID-19 vaccine and how she felt afterward.

It can be important that the person administering the vaccine looks like, sounds like and has the same experiences as the person receiving it, said Dr. Nichols, an associate dean of clinical affairs at the Morehouse School of Medicine.

Impact of social media

Social media platforms must acknowledge their role in allowing misinformation and disinformation to be conveyed as real news and how that has damaged vaccine confidence, Dr. Bailey said.

“While social media has the potential to help provide accurate, evidence-informed health information, during the pandemic, it has contributed significantly to vaccine hesitancy with very little being done, until recently, to combat the spread of blatantly false information,” she said.

She noted that the AMA wrote a letter to CEOs of leading technology companies, urging them to remain vigilant against the proliferation of unintentional misinformation and purposeful disinformation on their sites.

Remove barriers to vaccination

Other factors that have kept people from getting vaccinated include transportation and worries about lost wages if unable to work because of temporary side effects.

“We must ensure that communities struggling with access are met where they are,” Dr. Bailey said. “These communities need local solutions and partnerships with local leaders to find the best possible strategies to bringing vaccinations to communities struggling with access.”

Dr. Bailey remarked at how the rates of new COVID-19 infections and deaths have sharply declined, but Americans are still dying from the virus and related complications, so it remains a serious threat.

“Widespread access to accurate, evidence-based information that is grounded in science is key to our success,” Dr. Bailey said. “The AMA and our members are strongly committed to ending this global pandemic and to fighting medical misinformation.”