Challenges of COVID-19 and HIV demand patient-physician teamwork

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Jennifer Lubell
Contributing News Writer

Two ongoing health crises underscore the role of doctors in shaping conversations about vaccines, treatments and health disparities. In a webinar sponsored by the AIDS Foundation of Chicago, AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, discussed the AMA’s latest efforts to respond to COVID-19 and HIV, and protect and inform patients.

COVID-19 continues to dominate health care resources, with the fast-spreading Delta variant rekindling new fears about mask mandates and lockdowns.

Delta (B.1.617.2) is the most contagious and severe of the COVID-19 variants, representing more than 90% of new cases in the United States. Vaccines are highly effective in preventing severe illness and death.

“The good news that a lot of folks are listening” to that message, said Dr. Harmon. More than half a million COVID-19 vaccinations are being administered each day in the U.S.

“Fifty percent of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated,” he said, noting that “70% have received at least one dose of vaccine.”

Addressing falsehoods about vaccines

Amid all the misinformation about vaccines, physicians and other health professionals serve as credible ambassadors of information, said Dr. Harmon. People might repeat false information they’ve heard about the vaccines. He advised physicians and other influencers to listen to these concerns.

“Don’t laugh at them or insult their intelligence. They have to have a valid answer,” he said. Explain that the COVID virus attacks blood vessels, the brain, the respiratory system—and that the vaccine
stops this invasion.

Reassure them that the vaccine doesn’t do anything else, he added. “It won’t change DNA; it will protect you from disease.”

The AMA, which adopted policy in 2020 to address COVID-19 vaccine misinformation, has participated in the Ad Council and COVID Collaborative “It’s Up to You” campaign to educate and build confidence around the COVID vaccine.

The campaign “appeals to people wanting to protect themselves and their loved ones, so that they can return to things they can enjoy and that they’ve missed,” said Dr. Harmon.

**Higher risk for those with HIV**

People living with HIV are at especially high risk and susceptible to poor outcomes with COVID-19.

“With COVID occupying so much of our time, it’s important to remember that more than a million people in the U.S. have HIV,” noted Dr. Harmon. The U.S. sees 35,000 new HIV infections each year.

It’s a disease that demands uninterrupted therapy, he said. “As soon as you get that diagnosis, you need to get past any stigma that might be associated with it, recognize that individual, seek help and provide continued medical help in that therapy.”

This will help prevent HIV transmission, he said. “As we continue to get ahead of that curve, we'll have a better chance of eradicating it.” Antiretroviral drugs have been very effective in suppressing viral replication, he noted in his talk.

COVID-19 has also highlighted the pervasive inequities in the U.S. health system, with severe and disproportionate consequences for Black, Latino and Indigenous communities, said Dr. Harmon.

“These disparities have been brought to light as we advanced HIV treatment and as the COVID pandemic hit us,” he added.

AMA has addressed this issue on several fronts, launching its Center for Health Equity in 2019 and a three-year plan to address racial injustice and inequities in medicine this spring. Meanwhile, the AMA Foundation is targeting health inequity in the LGBTQ+ community. The foundation has awarded a $750,000 grant to the University of Wisconsin-Madison to provide fellowships for enhancing physician training and improving health outcomes of LGBTQ+ patients.

Dr. Harmon pointed to a bright spot on vaccination—there are many patients who appear to remain persuadable. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey points to growing acceptance of COVID-19
vaccines across racial and ethnic groups. “What’s interesting is only 13% of the respondents said they won’t get vaccinated.”

The remainder of Americans—those who have questions or concerns, but are not unalterably opposed to vaccination—"is the population we need to work with, to get to herd immunity," said Dr. Harmon.

The AMA recognizes the critical importance of scientific integrity, transparency and public trust in the fight to contain the global spread of COVID-19 and plan for the authorization, distribution and administration of COVID-19 vaccines. Stay updated with the AMA on COVID-19 and vaccine development.