

How to have crucial conversations with vaccine-hesitant patients

SEP 15, 2021

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Vaccine hesitancy is not new, but with the COVID-19 pandemic misinformation has spread faster than wildfire across social media. That is why it's time for physicians and their care teams to have crucial conversations with their patients who are vaccine hesitant.

"In my entire career, never have we had a more challenging time—from a public health concern—than right now," AMA Director of Practice Redesign Marie T. Brown, MD, said during a webinar, "COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy, Crucial Conversations, and Effective Messaging for Patients and Healthcare Teams," hosted by the International Antiviral Society-USA. This on-demand webinar is designated by the AMA for a maximum of 1.25 *AMA PRA Category 1 Credits*[™].

Vaccine misinformation "spread partly because we were all in lockdown and isolated and relying on social media even more," said Dr. Brown, adding that "anti-vaccine tweets—even before 2016—were four times more likely to be retweeted than pro-vaccine. And that's part of the problem."

Here is what physicians and care teams can do to help shift patients out of the vaccine-hesitant category.

Share stories as examples

"Storytelling is hard wired into our humanity, and we really need to use those stories," said Dr. Brown who uses her daughter's case as an example for COVID-19 vaccination during pregnancy.

“We do know clearly that if you get COVID when pregnant, the damage is real—poor pregnancy outcomes, pregnancy loss, preterm delivery and more time” in the neonatal intensive care unit, she explained, noting that “I’m happy to share with permission from my daughter that she got her vaccine during her second trimester and had a healthy baby” recently.

“And we’re thrilled that the baby now has some passive antibodies and is somewhat protected,” Dr. Brown added. “Sharing my story that my daughter got vaccinated and the baby and mom and dad are protected is key.”

Discover 10 tips for talking with patients about COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.

Ask what they’ve heard

“I found that if I asked my patients or my team, ‘What have you heard from your community?’ they’re more likely to be straightforward,” Dr. Brown said. That’s “because they know how you feel—you’re pro vaccine—so they’re going to be very hesitant or embarrassed to tell you what they believe.”

Don’t repeat the myth

“When you repeat a myth, if it’s repeated often enough, a lie becomes the truth—so be careful,” said Dr. Brown. “As we’ve learned from the government in crisis management, be careful when you’re talking to the public and avoid restating the myth because sometimes that’s all they hear, not that this myth is false.

“They may not hear the false part, but they hear the myth because that is so much more compelling,” she emphasized.

Remain calm and communicate

“Many of us may feel that these patients are difficult and it’s not our responsibility to try to change their minds,” Dr. Brown said, noting that physicians can understandably get frustrated. They feel as though they are just doing their jobs, or are exhausted and want the patient to simply trust the massive scientific evidence in favor of vaccination to protect against COVID-19 and many other diseases.

“If we have that attitude, we're not going to be able to communicate effectively,” she added. Instead, “let’s look inwardly, see how we can calm ourselves—and our teams—down so that we can provide more meaningful, effective messages.”

“Remember: The most trusted source of vaccine information is a patient’s personal physician—all physicians and specialists need to be messaging the importance of COVID vaccination,” said Dr. Brown, “Your recommendation to vaccinate has impact!”

An AMA STEPS Forward™ toolkit on adult immunization helps physicians and other health professionals save time while preventing disease by creating a team-based approach for a vaccination program within their primary care practice. This module addresses concerns about developing such a program and provides physicians with a comprehensive guide for implementation within their practice.

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