Willie Underwood III, MD, MSc, MPH, on why there's #NoTimeForFlu this year

AMA’s Moving Medicine video series amplifies physician voices and highlights developments and achievements throughout medicine.

Featured topic and speakers

In today’s episode of Moving Medicine, AMA Chief Experience Officer Todd Unger talks with Willie Underwood III, MD, MSc, MPH, a board-certified urologist, AMA Board Trustee and executive director of the Buffalo Center for Health Equity in Buffalo, New York, about a new flu vaccine campaign and what physicians need to know about this year’s flu season. Join the conversation on social by using #NoTimeForFlu.

Find more information on the flu vaccine campaign and additional resources.

Speaker

- Willie Underwood III, MD, MSc, MPH, AMA Board Trustee

Transcript

Unger: Hello, this is the American Medical Association's Moving Medicine video and podcast. Today we’re joined by Dr. Willie Underwood, a board-certified urologist, AMA board trustee and executive director of the Buffalo Center for Health Equity in Buffalo, New York. He’ll share details about a new flu vaccine campaign and what physicians need to know about this year's flu season. I'm Todd Unger, AMA's chief experience officer in Chicago. Dr. Underwood, it seems kind of momentous that we're actually talking about some other virus besides COVID-19 and this is very important because we're going to talk about flu. Last year, there was a lot of talk about the twindemic potential combining COVID and flu, so before we get into talking about this season, can you tell us a little bit about how did last season play out?
Dr. Underwood: So last season, when you looked at globally and the United States, we had the most unusual, lowest number of people with the flu, right? So it was at lowest records. Now, when you start thinking about that, there are probably several reasons for that and I'm sure we're going to get into that but we had fewer illnesses, fewer hospitalizations and fewer deaths compared to previous seasons.

Unger: So, why? You kind of anticipated that question. What leads us to a low level like that?

Dr. Underwood: Well, COVID, COVID, COVID, right? So when we think about it, what did COVID do? We were wearing masks, we were staying at home, we were social distancing, the most thing our children weren't in school spreading the virus throughout the community and back and forth to each other. Right. Those things likely contributed right? And also we had influenza vaccinations also contributed to it as well.

Unger: Yeah, we are all at home and masking and all those mitigation measures combined with the vaccination. Now looking forward to this year's flu season, we got kids back in school already, people are out and about more, what is kind of the prognosis?

Dr. Underwood: Well, sorry to say that we're probably expected to have maybe one of the ... a worst flu season compared to before and we're also running the risk of having a combination of worst flu season and the return of COVID with all the sort of variations that we're now seeing now. So the thing that we were worrying about last year will most likely happen this year.

Unger: And there's the issue about a lack of exposure at a recent virus, how does that kind of play into the prognosis and the action steps there?

Dr. Underwood: So, people weren't really exposed last year, so we didn't build up that sort of immunity, so to speak, so that sort of adds to it. And then at the same time, we're having people who decrease mitigations from the COVID. So we're not wearing masks as much as we did, we're not doing the social distancing, we're now connecting, our children are now back in school. When you put that combination together, those are sort of the things, the reasons why we're definitely concerned that the flu season this year would be worse than it's been in the past.

Unger: And that is a perfect segue into what we're talking about, which is this year's flu campaign. It is a joint effort between the AMA, the CDC and the Ad Council. Can you talk about the goal of the campaign and how physicians can get the message out?

Dr. Underwood: Well, this is a great campaign. Number one, our goal is just to reach those who are greatest need or greatest risk of being sick from the flu and potentially dying from the flu or if we're sick we've got to go get hospitalized, right? So the goal of this campaign to reach out to high risk groups, African Americans, Black Hispanics, Latinos, to have a shared message that is very relevant.
to these groups, right? So the message is creative concepts, we have 45 million people who get sick with the flu each year, we have over 800,000 people who are hospitalized and the real thing is to say, "No one has time for that." Especially now when we have COVID, whenever people are trying to get back to their lives, we’re trying to push the economy forward. Everyone has all these other concerns that are going on. Let's not get sick. No one has time for the flu. If you want to know more, go to GetMyFluShot.org.

Unger: All right, GetMyFluShot.org and there’s a special hashtag that corresponds to your campaign that physicians can use in their social media posts. Do you want to talk about that?

Dr. Underwood: Yes. #NoTimeForFlu, right? We don't have time for it. No time for flu. I think it’s catchy, we should all should be using it. We should get all the information that we can from GetMyFluShot.org and we should definitely #NoTimeForFlu.

Unger: That is exactly how I feel about it. I hate being sick. I don't want the flu. I don't have time to be sick and I certainly don't want those around me on my team, so I always encourage them to get vaccinated. Physicians themselves have been doing a lot of convincing lately on the vaccine front. What are the top line messages that physicians need to be communicating to patients in regard to getting a flu shot, particularly this year?

Dr. Underwood: The best way to protect yourself from the flu is to get vaccinated. The best way to protect the people you love, get vaccinated. The best way to protect the people who are most likely to get sick in the hospitalizing or dying such as infants, young children, the elderly. The best way to protect them is to get vaccinated. The key is to what? Get vaccinated.

Unger: Absolutely. In fact, I made it a date with my wife and we've already gotten our flu shot but is there kind of an ideal time to get your flu shot?

Dr. Underwood: Well, the ideal time was September and October, right? So we're encouraging everyone to get vaccinated before the end of October. However, if you don't get vaccinated by the end of October, you can go all the way up to January and even beyond, as long as the flu is a threat, right? So we'd like you to get the best time in September, October, if not, you can go up to January but as long as the flu is a threat, then vaccinations can prevent the flu.

Unger: And in terms of parameters about who should get the flu shot, what's your guidance there?

Dr. Underwood: Six months and older. Anyone six months and older can get the flu shot. So we don't have to worry about you fitting into a specific group, unless there's some medical reasons why you can't get a flu shot, then you should get one if you're over six months.

Unger: Now you mentioned earlier about the concerns about the combination of COVID and the flu. For someone who hadn't gotten a COVID shot yet, what are the guidelines in terms of kind of co-
administration like, can you get them at the same time?

Dr. Underwood: Yes. So shots can be co-administered at the same time. And especially when you start thinking about people, we call them coming from the ... they don't come to the doctor much, they come in, you get them in, they come in for a flu shot or for a COVID vaccination as well. You say, "Look why don't we do them both right, and you can do that safely." Now I know, people heard initially when the COVID vaccines came out that you should only give the COVID vaccine by itself and don't combine it with other things. But that was because we people, we were more worried and we didn't have the information that we do now. So people were being extremely cautious. Now we know that there is safety studies to show that they could be given together. So let's give them together. The main thing is that if you have someone come in, if you can give them a flu shot, get them a flu shot. If they come in and if they have not been vaccinated, that's an opportunity to encourage vaccination as well for COVID-19.

Unger: Well, thank you so much, Dr. Underwood. I know there's been a lot of confusion about it that hopefully that makes it clear, get your flu shot. If you haven't gotten your COVID-19 vaccine yet, get that and your flu shot at the same time. The data is in and flu season is fast approaching. Thanks again for being here today, Dr. Underwood. Once again, for more inform on the flu vaccine campaign and additional resources, visit GetMyFluShot.org. We'll back soon with another Moving Medicine video and podcast. Never miss an episode by subscribing to AMA's YouTube channel, Apple or Spotify, wherever you listen to your podcast and find all of our videos and podcasts at ama-assn.org/podcasts. Thanks for joining us. Please take care.

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