To promote vaccine boosters, explain how medical knowledge grows

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At this critical moment in the COVID-19 pandemic when the Omicron variant—and now the stealth Omicron subvariant—account for most of the cases, there is an urgent need for Americans to get vaccinated and boosted and, consequently, a big demand on physicians to communicate these facts to their patients and the public.

“It is a busy day in every doctor’s practice these days, it seems like. But part of what we have to do is be ambassadors for vaccines. We have to do that as part of our day,” AMA President Gerald E. Harmon, MD, said during a recent episode of the “AMA COVID-19 Update” regarding the role physicians can play at this pivotal time in the pandemic.

“We need to understand that although the Supreme Court decided that the vaccine mandate as described was not constitutional, what we have decided—and we know—is that vaccines do work,” said Dr. Harmon. “Effective vaccination with appropriate full vaccination and boosters seems to have a substantial influence on reducing the spread of COVID-19 including all variants—even Omicron—right now, so it’s very important to get vaccinated.”

Patients’ confusion is understandable

As a family physician in his coastal South Carolina hometown of Georgetown, Dr. Harmon is faced with dozens of questions from his patients every day, even on weekends. Those questions range from what to do if they have been exposed to whether their persistent cough or headache could be a symptom of COVID-19.

“We have such a transmissible variant with Omicron that everybody’s a little suspicious of any out-of-the-ordinary symptom,” said Dr. Harmon, adding that “I try to be consistent in my advice.”
“The confusion is really, unfortunately, part of the learning process that we’ve learned more and more about this coronavirus pandemic over the last 23 months,” he said. “We didn’t really have a lot of concerns about it before because we were learning on the go, and this is science.”

“As the science evolves, we have to evolve our therapies and our recommendations,” said Dr. Harmon. “I ask everyone to … at least be sensitive to the fact that sometimes recommendations can change, but they tend to change for the better. They changed consistent with the knowledge.”

Learn what doctors wish patients knew about COVID-19 vaccine boosters.

**Demystify the process**

As the pandemic has dragged on, Dr. Harmon said, he has come to realize that along with an infectious disease pandemic, the U.S. has “a pandemic of mistrust, distrust and—perhaps—miscommunication that’s exacerbating what is already a problem of the viral pandemic,” said Dr. Harmon.

“We need to be vaccine and truth ambassadors in health care.

“The trusted physician, a local physician, a community physician like myself and many others in America, can demystify some of the processes that we’re talking about,” he said. He advised physicians to give specific answer answers in response to questions about vaccines.

“If I answer them with facts, with my perspective and our recommendations, all of our studies show that that trusted family doctor or that trusted health care advisor can really sway and encourage people to take appropriate precautions,” whether it’s public health precautions, vaccine acceptance, treatment options or quarantine and isolation, Dr. Harmon said. “We need to be purveyors of the truth, and we need to answer these questions with the best science available knowing that we are trusted advisors for health care, for everybody.”

Discover eight communication strategies to boost COVID-19 vaccine acceptance.

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