

Perspective/Opinion

COVID -19 Vaccine Hesitancy

By Amy Farkas, MD, MS

"I just don't want it."
"I heard a 9-year-old boy died of the vaccine."
"I'm not sure about that."
"It's so new. I want to wait a bit."
"I think this whole thing is a hoax."

These are just some of the comments I have heard from patients in the last few months since the COVID-19 vaccine became available. As a primary care provider, I have spent the last year feeling helpless. I could not protect my patients against COVID-19 and if they became ill, I had very little to offer other than a prayer and cough suppressants. I educated them about the importance of masks, social distance, and isolation if they were sick, but it never seemed like it was enough. The availability of the COVID-19 vaccines changed all of that. I now had something to offer them; something that could potentially save their life.

I am fortunate that I work at the VA which has a strong supply of COVID-19 vaccines and that most of my patients are eager for the vaccine, readily accepting my offer to schedule their appointment to receive it. However, I have encountered many who are hesitant- an observation that mirrors national data on the subject. According to the US Census, 51% of Americans report that they will definitely receive the vaccine with another 25.6% reporting that they will probably be vaccinated when it's their turn. That leaves almost a quarter of the U.S. population who are reluctant or even steadfastly opposed to being vaccinated. As healthcare providers, we are uniquely equipped to reach that last 25%. But how do we change minds in the face of so much distrust and misinformation?

It starts by understanding our patients and demonstrating our caring. I often start my conversation with my patients stating: “I wanted to talk with you a little bit about the COVID-19 vaccine. What are your thoughts?” For patients who are willing to receive the vaccine, I tell them when they can expect to receive a vaccine and provide education on expected side effects. For patients who are hesitant, I follow up by asking “Why?” or “Tell me more about that.” Open ended questions allow the patient to share their fears and concerns, which can help us to tailor a response.

I attempt to respond to the specific concerns of each individual, while also providing general education on the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. For example, awareness of racial injustice is one specific area where sensitivity can aid in persuasion. For my patients who are Black and Brown, I acknowledge the structural inequalities and institutional racism that have contributed to mistrust of the medical community, the government, and the vaccine. I make a strong recommendation for the vaccine and tell them specifically that I trust the vaccine and that I trust the science. I remind them that I would never recommend something to them that I would not take myself or give to my parents, and I tell them that I and my family members have received the vaccine. Additionally, because I am working with Veterans who have served their country, I remind my patients that confronting the challenge facing our country requires everyone to do their part. I compare vaccination to growing a victory garden in World War II- a message that has special resonance for those who have served.

My approach is not always successful. If at the end of our conversation my patient is still hesitant, I tell them we can discuss it further or make a plan to touch base in the near future. My ultimate goal is to demonstrate to my patients that my advocacy for vaccination is rooted in my concern for their individual health, safety, and happiness. When these efforts pay off, the result is tremendously gratifying. After one telephone appointment, one of my patients ended our conversation this way: “Dr. Farkas, I want to tell you something, I promise that when it’s my turn I will get the shot. Thank you for caring about me.” It was the highlight of my day.

Resources for Conversations with Patients
https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/hcp/engaging-patients.html
https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/covid-19-vaccine-hesitancy-10-tips-talking-patients
https://www.nejm.org/covid-vaccine

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