

The Power of Conversation

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A year and a half after the SARS-CoV-2 virus began disrupting our world in unimaginable ways, this summer has been filled with a sense of pre-pandemic normalcy. Public pools have reopened, restaurants are as crowded as they once were, sporting events have resumed, Fourth of July celebrations were held, a record number of visitors have flooded the Black Hills, the Sturgis Bike Rally was expected to be the largest in over 30 years, and schools throughout the state are opening for in-person classes.^{1,2} The social connectedness we all longed for through the most isolating parts of the pandemic has largely been restored. However, as the Delta variant spreads throughout our country and world, we worry that this much-needed restoration of normalcy has the potential to create a false sense of security that “COVID is gone” and that life is irrevocably back to normal.

The recent increase in positive cases looks different than in the past. As described by CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, MD, “this is becoming a pandemic of the unvaccinated.”^{3,4} In fact, more than 9 in 10 COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, and deaths of recent have occurred in people who are unvaccinated.⁵ We find this statistic troubling. Nearly a year ago, exhausted medical professionals were vocal in their pleas for help. We were in search of ways to better protect ourselves and others. Now, we have a product of scientific ingenuity that has been shown to save lives with little disruption to daily routine. We have a tool that vastly decreases one’s risk of hospitalization and death from COVID-19. Despite this potentially life-saving opportunity, many remain unvaccinated.

We happen to fall within a demographic that remains largely unvaccinated: the young adult population. As of Aug. 16, 2021, only 38 percent of South Dakotans aged 18-24 and 43 percent of those aged 25-39 have received the COVID-19 vaccine.⁶ Young adult vaccination rates are roughly half those in those 65 years of age and older. This disparity represents a large public health opportunity.

The Kaiser Family Foundation COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor report published in July 2021 discusses the attitudes of study participants toward the COVID-19 vaccines over time. The study splits participants into three groups: those initially interested in receiving the vaccine, those who initially opposed the vaccine, and those who opted to “wait and see.” Interestingly, 24 percent of those initially opposed to the vaccine have since been vaccinated, suggesting that people are willing to reconsider over time. Meanwhile, 54 percent of patients who initially opted to “wait and see”

have now been vaccinated. Among those who were eventually vaccinated (but were either initially opposed or contemplating), the most common explanation for their change in decision was an opinion-changing conversation with trusted friends, family members, or personal doctors.⁷

In a world inundated with competing narratives surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, the power of conversation between two trusting parties cannot be understated. Both personally and professionally, we have the opportunity to engage in conversations that may inspire another person to reconsider their decision to go unvaccinated. A study published in August 2021 found Canadian University students were 76 times more likely to get a vaccine if encouraged by their doctor.⁸ With this potential impact in mind, understanding effective techniques to convey this message remains a final hurdle. The Mayo Clinic released an article discussing evidence-based strategies for clinical organizations to address COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy.⁹ Suggested strategies include: use of strong recommendations (for example, “the COVID-19 vaccination is safe and effective, and I strongly recommend that you get your COVID-19 vaccine today”) or presumptive-style language (such as, “after this visit, the nurse will give you your COVID-19 vaccine”). The report also recommends framing messages in terms of gain, offering novel information about the virus, appealing to altruism and prosocial behavior, countering misperceptions, and addressing barriers.

Many of the states experiencing an increase in cases are seeing a concurrent uptick in vaccination rates. Our hope for South Dakota is that we would be proactive rather than reactive; that we would choose the benefits of a vaccine before more people fall needlessly ill. Surely, the effort to vaccinate is multi-faceted. Large, organizational- and policy-level interventions are critical. However, our hope is that this piece serves as a reminder that engaging in conversation really can change this narrative, one patient, friend, or family member at a time.

REFERENCES

1. Engan S. Rapid City tourism exceeding expectations for 2021. MSN. Retrieved from www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/rapid-city-tourism-exceeding-expectations-for-2021/ar-AAM-TAMR?ocid=uxbndblng. August 3, 2021.
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