

Podcast: Patient education for COVID-19 vaccination

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Hello and good afternoon. Thanks for joining our new podcast. We will talk today about how to educate patients on Covid-19 vaccination. My name is Ute Papkalla and I am here with my colleague, Carina Dinkel. We are both members of the Difäm health team.

Carina, why is it so important to educate a patient who comes for vaccination?

Thanks, Ute, for this question. Many people are insecure when it comes to a Covid-19 vaccination. Many false rumours circulate in social media and people come to us as health personnel to get correct information and advice. We should be able to make a clear and strong recommendation for this vaccination.

Carina, please give me two good reasons why people should get vaccinated.

Sure, Ute. People come to a health centre because they are concerned about the corona virus disease and because they know that there is a vaccine against this disease. We have to underline that it is correct to be concerned about Covid-19 because it is a dangerous disease, which can turn into a life-threatening condition. We can tell the patients that the vaccination will reduce their risk of severe disease to a minimum. In addition, once they are fully vaccinated, they will not only protect themselves but also other beloved persons in their family and circle of friends.

Thank you for these two good reasons: protect my beloved ones and myself from an unpredictable and sneaky disease. However, people also ask themselves why they should get immunized at all against Covid-19 because there are only few cases in their region and they don't know a single one personally.

This is a very common challenge for us as health personnel. In many African countries, the numbers of confirmed Covid cases are quite low and it does not seem to make a lot of sense to be vaccinated. However, Covid-19 is an airborne disease that can spread with immense speed. In addition, it is unpredictable with respect to the health outcome of an infected person. Therefore, it could erupt in any of our communities at any time leading to quite a

number of people who die or suffer from Long Covid; especially, as the treatment options in most African settings are few. Just think about the pictures you saw of the wave in India or Malawi. There is not even enough oxygen in many settings to treat patients who suffer from breathing problems due to Covid. If you develop a severe form of Covid in a resource-limited setting, you cannot be sure that you will get the treatment you need. Therefore, it is better to prevent infection at all costs.

This is a real threat even if many African individuals or communities have not yet experienced it. It will be enough if one person travels to a big city and comes back with the infection. He or she will infect several others before even developing own symptoms.

In the course of our lives, we were vaccinated against a number of dangerous and deadly diseases, which are almost eradicated due to the immunization efforts.

Can we eradicate Covid-19 through vaccination?

There are viral diseases that cannot be eradicated, like influenza, because the virus as infectious agent changes constantly. Many scientists think that Covid-19 will become an endemic disease in our societies. That means that it will always be there but over time it will become less dangerous. We have already seen that the corona virus produces variants. Today we seem to be safe with only few cases of infection in our community and tomorrow a new variant travels the globe and leads to a new peak of infection in unvaccinated persons. We have seen that in India.

Our hope is clearly the immunisation: If the majority of people are vaccinated, the virus cannot easily hop from one person to the next. This reduces the risk of severe disease for the entire population and reduces the development of new variants. Fortunately, the current vaccines help against all currently active variants of the corona virus. In order to control the disease, about three quarters of the world population have to be immunized. Therefore, we should promote vaccination also in the African communities.

Another point: If people want to travel, they will definitely have to be vaccinated.

Many patients wonder how these vaccines could be developed in such a short time. They doubt that they are safe.

I have often heard the question about the safety of the vaccines. It is an understandable question in the light of the fast development of the Covid-19 vaccines. However, the technology the vaccines are based on is known for at least 20 years, for some vaccines even more than a century.

Let us look at the safety of these vaccines. It is true that we did not have many data when the vaccines came on the market. However, by now, millions of people have been vaccinated all over the world. We know much better, which side effects can occur. At least in this respect, the African citizens can rely on millions of Europeans, Asians and Americans who served as real life guinea pigs.

Some people do not only have doubts concerning the safety of the vaccines. They even believe that evil powers developed the vaccines to harm citizens for example to insert a microchip or to render people infertile. What would you say to this suspicion?

When it comes the weird rumours, it is a question of belief. I can only point out that the World Health Organization as an independent international body and numerous national pharmaceutical regulators have screened the scientific results and made their recommendations in favour of the vaccines. They would have found anything purposely harmful in the vaccine if it were there. Just as a personal statement: I was already vaccinated in January 2021, when the vaccine was really new; and I recommended it to all my family members, once it was their turn.

I think it is important to emphasize the harm that is done by circulating fake news videos. These videos harm body and soul, since people lose the trust in scientific proof and institutions or even governmental guidelines. Every video shared in social networks increases insecurity. It is essential not to share these videos but to delete them on the spot. They might even be carriers of computer viruses, which ruin your computer.

Thanks for pointing out the danger of fake news videos and messages. There is another suspicion circulating, saying the vaccines reduce the fertility of women and men and render particularly men infertile. How can we disprove this suspicion?

Yes, I also heard about these rumours. Scientists looked at the sperm concentration and the sperm motility in semen before and after immunization against Covid-19. There was no reduction in any of those parameters of male fertility. In the first months of vaccination, scientists also looked closely at female fertility and pregnancy. No negative effects on the menstrual cycle, the progress of the pregnancy or the development of the baby could be linked to the vaccines. By now, several vaccines have been approved for pregnant and lactating women.

On the contrary, several studies have shown that an infection with Covid-19 poses a much greater risk for fertility, erectile function and pregnancy than vaccination. Due to their changed immune response in pregnancy, pregnant women are more likely to contract the virus. They also carry a higher risk of complications when infected with Covid-19. Some women complained of disruptions of their menstrual cycle after vaccination. Indeed, the same effect was seen in women who went through Covid-19. It seems that infection, as well as vaccination act as stressors that can cause short-term disruptions of the menstrual cycle. However, the virus causing Covid-19 was still present in the penile tissue of men who had recovered from the disease and afterwards complained of erectile dysfunction. This may be due to the high blood supply of the penis that also carries the virus into these tissues.

These are good arguments. We have to point out that Covid-19 is the bigger risk for reproductive and sexual health than vaccination. Let us come to another assumption. Some

people think that it would be better to undergo infection in order to develop a more efficient natural immunity. What do you think of that?

There is nothing to say against natural immunity even though we currently do not know how long it lasts after infection. However, there is no disadvantage of becoming immune with the help of a vaccination. We can see in the numbers of antibodies that vaccine-induced immunity is similar to natural immunity. The difficult thing with natural immunity is that you have to undergo infection and this puts you at risk of a severe course of Covid-19 disease, which can lead to death or to long-standing disability.

Now, every individual has to balance the odds: will you be among the persons with light Covid or will you end up with pneumonia and multiple organ failure? However, you should not forget that Covid is an infectious disease that might affect a family member or a friend or neighbour worse than it affects you. Even if you experience only a mild form of Covid-19 you may kill someone else by passing on the infection. We should see us all as part of a global effort: The more people are vaccinated, the lower the overall viral load.

Thank you, Carina, for these thoughts. We are all in the same boat and we have to make sure that we can lead normal lives again and that our economies recover. Vaccination is free but illness costs a lot – for treatment, for the inability to work and even, in the worst case – for the funeral. We therefore warmly ask you all to get your shots of the Covid vaccine.

Until then, stay safe and healthy and be blessed.

Sources:

<https://www.cdc.gov/vaccines/covid-19/hcp/answering-questions.html>

https://www.rki.de/DE/Content/Infekt/Impfen/Materialien/Downloads-COVID-19-Vektorimpfstoff/Aufklaerungsbogen-de.pdf?__blob=publicationFile

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