



Becoming FLUent: Communicating Prevention Messages

Questions & Answers: Patricia (Patsy) A. Stinchfield, MS, CPNP, CIC

Q: What's your strategy for engaging with people who are anti-vaccine (e.g., they have conspiracy theories)? Is it better not to engage at all? And we've learned that personal stories are very persuasive. How do you balance personal stories with facts and statistics?

A: I acknowledge flu vaccine is an imperfect tool but it is still the best tool we have to protect people from a deadly disease. I know it's deadly because I work in a Children's Hospital where last year 8 children died of influenza and very consistent with the national data, most had not been vaccinated and half were normal, healthy children. I strongly encourage vaccination. To NOT vaccinate is to take a risk. Just because one has never had influenza previously doesn't mean they won't ever get it. They have been lucky. Influenza is NOT "just a bad cold", it is one of the most deadly viruses we know of and even if the majority of people get sick and do not die, it is a miserable week in bed with high fever, cough and awful body aches missing work, school, events that could be prevented. The risk of passing influenza on to a baby too young to be vaccinated, a pregnant woman who is at high risk for severe disease or someone undergoing chemotherapy is a risk not worth taking. I believe in continuing the conversation in a respectful-, evidence-, and experientially-based dialogue. I let them know I am vaccinated and so are my children and family and I don't want any less for them and their family.

Q: How do you communicate with the public when flu manufacturers have shortages or delays in shipments? Families expecting immunization at well-child and other visits may be upset to learn the clinic is out, especially early in the season.

A: This is a difficult question because the answer is a very local one. Some parts of the country may have their supply and others may not. Communicating your local situation via emails to parents, a parent electronic newsletter, or your organization's Facebook page or Twitter account on the current status and leaving taped voicemail messages or a line for them to call into for the latest message is helpful.