

Changing the Conversation on Adult Influenza Vaccination

Consensus Statement

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SOCIEDADE INTERAMERICANA DE CARDIOLOGIA



Influenza poses a serious global threat every year infecting more than 1 billion people, resulting in 3 to 5 million cases of severe illness and about 290,000 to 650,000 respiratory deaths worldwide. For older adults and those with underlying medical conditions such as diabetes, heart disease and lung disease, influenza infection can cause serious complications, hospitalizations, loss in functional ability and even death.

Immunisation is one of the most effective public health interventions of our time, yet influenza vaccination rates are generally poor in the at-risk populations. Given the profound underuse of vaccination and its potential life-threatening impact, there is a real and urgent need to raise the awareness on the importance of influenza vaccination.

The “Changing the Conversation on Adult Influenza Vaccination” study identifies and assesses content and methods of delivery of public health influenza campaigns. It also highlights gaps in communication and practice that range from a paucity of targeted messages to at-risk populations, to the effectiveness of channels and pipelines for message dissemination.

Authorities and stakeholders in the fields of gerontology, public health policy and infectious disease, as well as patient and ageing organisations, gathered at a recent expert meeting to discuss the study findings and explore the value of informing the public health community on how to improve communication practices in adult influenza vaccination.

The involved delegates developed a rich understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing effective public communication on adult influenza vaccination and contributed to the discussion around specific strategies to push for policy and practice improvement. Consensus was met on the following:

Effective public communication

Although many influenza awareness campaigns are resource-rich, their impact on influenza vaccination rates is not evident. Communicating effectively with those who are most vulnerable about the importance of influenza vaccination remains a key issue for the public health community to address an opportunity for campaign improvement.

Knowledge and guidelines of effective public communication on adult influenza vaccination are essential prerequisites to close the gaps in practice and improve influenza vaccination awareness and uptake rates. Evidence-informed and co-ordinated communication strategies need to define the agreed communication goal(s), outline of vaccination priorities and message target groups, specify the roles and responsibilities of multi-sectoral stakeholders, elucidate the tools and channels and build consensus on the timeline of messaging.

Clear strategy and guidance supporting the development and implementation of a national influenza communication campaign should be used to advocate for resources (such as promotional material) which could be freely available for stakeholders to adapt to their representative audience and the local situation.

Multi stakeholder partnerships

Cross-sectoral and cross-disciplinary engagement are critical to a successful influenza vaccination campaign. Optimally federal, provincial, territorial, and local public health agencies should work more closely with patient, professional and advocacy organisations, scientists and communication experts to co-design and test material for targeted audiences. Each stakeholder group plays a vital role in disseminating co-ordinated messages that could have lifesaving outcomes for the population(s) they represent. For example, patient and ageing organizations have the capacity to reach millions of the most at-risk populations and play an essential role in helping to inform the immunization policy and program.

Targeted campaign and tailored messages

The universal nature of messages to largely undifferentiated audiences is a historical barrier to stimulating vaccination uptake. A targeted communication strategy must be integrated to ensure individuals at greatest risk are at the center of the message design and dissemination. Message and campaign development should consider health literacy and provide a portal to information that is accessible to different audiences and demographic profiles, including but not limited to age and socioeconomic status. Content of messages should be tailored to address the demands of specific at-risk groups to ensure they effectively respond to individual concerns and needs.

Interactive communication

Communication is a system of connected interactions. It is therefore important to move beyond purely “messaging” and “information dissemination” toward interactive communication approaches in campaigns. Examples include a face-to-face campaign to mobilize vaccination behavior and providing a hotline to answer personal questions on vaccination. Conversations are the keys to enhancing communication around vaccinations. It provides the opportunity for message recipients to engage in shaping public health messages according to their needs and increases the chance of information providers to respond to individual concerns and questions.

Monitoring and evaluation of messages

Quality and credible information is the foundation of public health communication. With proven facts, reliable data, and sound scientific explanations behind the health information, messages have credibility, legitimacy, and the trust of audiences. In addition to enhancing evidence-based messaging, there is a need to develop and implement strategies to identify and counteract mis/dis-information that undermines the trust in vaccines regularly noted in pediatric vaccination campaigns.

Message dissemination should be timed to optimize protection in at-risk populations during the annual influenza season. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the quality, credibility and timeliness of campaign messages are essential to ensure that the effectiveness and safety of vaccination is communicated effectively and positively impact behavior.

For queries relating to this document, please contact: JBarratt@ifa.ngo

International Federation on Ageing
1 Bridgepoint Drive, Suite G.238
Toronto, ON, M4M 2B5, Canada

www.vaccines4life.com

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