

COVID-19: A New Opportunity for Vaccine Appreciation?

By Jeanine Guidry

Over the past few decades, in spite of the great public health success of vaccines, vaccine hesitancy has continued, especially since the publication of a now-retracted study by Andrew Wakefield (1998). In addition, social media platforms increasingly publish misinformation about vaccines (Guidry et al., 2015; Broniatowski et al., 2018).

One of the reasons people are less likely to trust vaccines is that these days, we rarely see the devastating effects of serious vaccine-preventable diseases in our own lives as well as in the media. Let's be honest, when was the last time you encountered someone paralyzed because of polio? Vaccines have not just largely erased diseases, they often have also erased the *fear* of those diseases, and paradoxically decreased the appreciation for what they can accomplish.

In today's COVID-19 pandemic world, however, we find ourselves in a somewhat unique situation: Not only are we in the midst of an outbreak of which we learn new and often scary things every day, that has effectively closed down much of our worldwide societies, and where the death toll in the U.S. only already approaches 100,000; there is no broadly tested, effective, and safe treatment or vaccine yet available for this disease.

And in addition, our televisions and Facebook newsfeeds and Internet News Channels have been filled with images of our fellow world citizens fighting for their lives in hospital intensive care units, with images of our (grand)parents in nursing homes isolated from us except by video chat, and with images of our healthcare workers taking care of the afflicted in PPE that never seems to be sufficiently available and that bruises their faces during long shifts.

This sudden visibility of disease consequences may provide an opportunity as we suddenly are forced to reckon with a terrifying disease during an outbreak for which science and medicine not yet have a solution. With this, we hope, may come a renewed level of vaccine appreciation, and particularly COVID-19 vaccine appreciation, and with that, a higher level of COVID-19 uptake intent.

However, anti-vaccination pages and accounts across social media platforms are quickly sowing misinformation about the future vaccine.

The effort to develop a COVID-19 vaccine in many ways has been unprecedented. Dozens of research teams around the world are working on developing a future COVID-19 vaccine, and several of those are in the clinical trial stage. Even with these massive efforts, public health experts expect the earliest potential availability for a COVID-19 vaccine is likely to be in mid-2021 at the earliest - and that is considered lightning speed in vaccine development circles.

However, it is crucial that, once a vaccine against COVID-19 becomes available, people quickly get the vaccine, and the increasing levels of misinformation swirling on social media platforms may point to a growing area of concern. While social media companies increasingly curating vaccine-related messages on their platforms, curation alone is not enough.

It is critical that public health professionals quickly work on education focused on the vaccine, creating innovative, engaging messages that communicate now, reaching those in broad audiences who may be hesitant about the vaccine before too much misinformation makes it their way.

References

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