

Breakdown of communication leads to hesitancy with COVID-19

On May 27, Dr. Vin Gupta sat in front of his computer screen talking to some of the best athletes in the world. The Seattle Seahawks and head coach Pete Carroll had invited him to speak to the team about the importance of getting the COVID-19 vaccine and answer any questions they had.

While the collection of squares Gupta was talking to on Zoom were hardly your everyday crowd, he noticed his discussion with the team was no different than the ones he had when speaking to the public.

The players were confused. They were trying to piece together the bits of information — both factual and myth — they had heard throughout the pandemic as they weighed their options about getting the vaccine.

“[Dr. Gupta] led us through that discussion with great depth and clarity. He just has it nailed,” said Pete Carroll, the Seahawks head coach May 27. “The doctor was remarkably on point and becomes a great resource to us moving forward...his thoughts are so clear, and he's advised so many people throughout this whole process. He's been on point throughout. We have a great ally there.”

Gupta said this idea of having transparent discussions about COVID-19 and the vaccine — especially to younger demographics — is important and a responsibility he's tried to tackle over the past 14 months.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Gupta has been critical of the communication provided to the public. One area Gupta said the government, medical professionals and the media have struggled to successfully communicate is the true effectiveness of the various COVID-19 vaccines.

Gupta highlighted a *New York Times* headline from April 6 which read, “AstraZeneca's Covid-19 Vaccine Is Found to Be 79% Effective in U.S. Study.” The headline is incorrect according to Gupta, who said the efficacy of the AstraZeneca vaccine is 79% — meaning it prevented disease and transmission 79% of the time in controlled clinical trials — but in fact, its effectiveness is nearly 100% at keeping people out of the hospital.

Gupta said this communication breakdown and misunderstanding are critical when combating the pandemic.

“Really astonishing to me how I think we just missed the boat on effectively communicating things that we should be communicating to the masses,” Gupta said.

One of the largest byproducts from the lack of communication has been vaccine hesitancy, most recently by teenagers and people in their 20s who perceive themselves as healthy.

For the last 14 months, younger demographics have heard they are not at high risk when it comes to contracting COVID-19, leading them to be wary of the benefits of receiving the vaccine. According to USA Facts — which uses a mix of data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and states — only 40% of people 18-24 years old have received their first shot.

“They want [medical professionals] to answer in a respectful way that acknowledges their risk-benefit calculation,” Gupta said. “It doesn't surprise me that younger people are like, ‘Do I really need this vaccine that we only have six to nine months worth of data? It's not that well known.’ It's actually quite rational.”

Gupta is not the only one recognizing this trend of teenagers and people in their 20s not getting the vaccine and the risk it poses.

“To me, the vaccine should have been communicated more as your civic duty and less of an individual thing,” said Dr. Andrew Bindman, chief medical officer at Kaiser Permanente. “It should have been more like jury duty, something that you are obligated to do for the benefit of society and not just a purely individual choice.”

In a report released June 9 by Kaiser Permanente to help increase COVID-19 vaccine confidence, they identified this high-risk vaccine archetype as “indifferent dwindlers.” In its recommendation on how to increase confidence within the archetype, Kaiser Permanente said persistent communication is key.

“They will require multiple nudges and an easy on-ramp to overcome their minimal risk aversion to COVID-19 infection,” the report said. “Highlight long-term risks of COVID-19. Present social and lifestyle benefits of the vaccine; like returning to normalcy, traveling or attending public events.”

Gupta said he is optimistic the worst of the pandemic is behind us. But as vaccination rates continue to decline in the country, he warns hesitancy creates the risk of new variants emerging which could be catastrophic and potentially set the world back to Day 0.

“I think we’ve lost opportunities to nip in the bud things like vaccine hesitancy or the preventable loss of life,” Gupta said. “There’s been a lot of consequences because of just misinformation and poor communication, even despite the best of intentions.”