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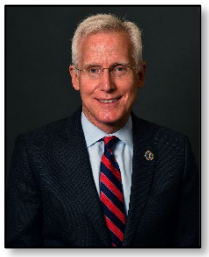
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Meaningful Lives As We Age

Momentum Discussions Podcast from the Gerontological Society of America

The Significance of Ensuring Older Adults Have Access to Age-Appropriate Vaccines

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Announcer:
Welcome to a Gerontological Society of America Momentum Discussion podcast where we delve into topics that are generating great excitement and advancement in aging.

James Appleby:
Welcome to today's podcast, The Significance of Ensuring Older Adults Have Access to Age-Appropriate Vaccines. My name is James Appleby, and I'm CEO here at the Gerontological Society of America (GSA), and I'm pleased to serve as host for today's podcast. I'm delighted to be joined by my colleague, Patricia D'Antonio (Trish) who serves as Vice President of Policy and Professional Affairs here at the Society.

For those of you not familiar, GSA is the multidisciplinary professional membership organization that represents experts across all fields who study all facets of aging with a life course orientation. GSA has a longstanding commitment to increasing adult vaccination rates.

About a decade ago, GSA launched its National Adult Vaccination Program. This program supports the diverse interdisciplinary teams that are essential to increasing reverence for vaccines among older adults. Research clearly demonstrates that ensuring older adults receive their appropriate vaccines stimulates greater health for them, their families, their friends, their coworkers, and communities.

We also know that receiving your age-appropriate vaccines has a positive economic impact as individuals are able to maintain their work schedules, avoid long-term illnesses and hospitalization, maintain their social engagements, and enjoy all aspects of living. However, these life changing vaccines only work if individuals have access to them.

Trish, as part of your role as VP of Professional Affairs and Policy here at GSA, you have a leadership role with one of the coalitions GSA is actively involved with - the Adult Vaccine Access Coalition (AVAC). What is AVAC all about?

Patricia D'Antonio:
Thanks James, and I'm really pleased to be here today. The Adult Vaccine Access Coalition (AVAC) was formed to advocate for federal policies that improve access to and increase utilization of vaccines among adults. Near universal access to immunizations for children has been one of the greatest public health accomplishments of the 20th century. AVAC seeks to achieve that same level of success when it comes to immunizations among adults. AVAC is made up of a diverse group of healthcare providers, organizations like vaccine innovators, pharmacies, public health organizations, and patient and consumer groups. We were founded in 2015, and I've been honored to represent GSA and serve as co-chair since 2019.

James Appleby:
Are there any specific examples of recent successes in the area of increasing access to vaccines for older individuals?

Patricia D'Antonio:
James, you might be surprised to know that in 2021, 3.4 million older adults over the age of 65 paid $234 million in out-of-pocket costs for vaccines. Thanks to Congressional Action, Medicare Part D enrollees can now get those vaccines for free or essentially no copay. Likewise, in October of 2023, all state Medicaid programs are required to cover recommended vaccines for adults with no cost sharing. We continue to advocate for the roughly 10% of adults who are uninsured or underinsured to receive those recommended vaccines at no cost.

James Appleby:
It seems like AVAC is really having a meaningful impact, and that's exciting to hear. I'd like to shift gears now and talk about a meeting coming up next week - the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices or ACIP. ACIP comprises medical and public health experts who develop recommendations on the use of vaccines in the civilian population in the US. I know that ACIP is scheduled to meet, and the committee is expected to vote on a couple of issues relevant to individuals 50 years of age and older. What is on the agenda that you're watching closely?

Patricia D'Antonio:
James, like many other colleagues, GSA follows ACIP activities closely as they play a leading role in all issues regarding immunizations, including what vaccines are recommended for older individuals, which is so important. Steps to increase access to vaccines are always welcome in these meetings. One item on the ACIP agenda relates to lowering the age when individuals can receive a vaccine to prevent pneumococcal infections. These cause a variety of severe illnesses from age 65 to age 50. If after studying the available research members of ACIP would vote to adopt a broad age-based recommendation for adults starting at the age of 50, it would significantly increase access to this vaccine. Research indicates that implementing such a recommendation would advance population health, disease prevention, and health equity. And doing so can help simplify the adult immunization schedule, improve health outcomes, and encourage increased vaccination.

James Appleby:
It certainly sounds like that would be a meaningful way to push forward increased access to that vaccine for the aging population. Are there any other items specific to the older population on the agenda?

Patricia D'Antonio:
What's really important on this agenda as well is that ACIP is expected to approve the 2025 recommended adult vaccine schedule. This provides guidance to clinicians and the public regarding which vaccines we should receive as we age. We are glad that the schedule recognizes the unique needs of older adults. Our focus at GSA has always been on ensuring that there's an opportunity for the provider to have meaningful conversation with older adults and their caregivers about vaccination needs.

James Appleby:
Trish, most individuals typically think about receiving vaccines from their healthcare provider. Over recent years, it's clear that pharmacists are having a bigger role in administering immunizations as well. Whose job is it to ensure we receive our appropriate immunizations as we age?

Patricia D'Antonio:
James, this is such an important question. All healthcare professionals can play a role. Physicians, nurses, pharmacists, physician associates, physician assistants, nurse practitioners, all administer immunizations. Other healthcare professionals also can contribute to this by advocating and helping to reinforce the value of vaccinations for all of us as we age. For example, social workers, physical therapists, and occupational therapists can really be influential in how we can explain the value of vaccination for all of us as we age.

James Appleby:
That approach certainly aligns well with GSA membership. For listeners who aren't familiar with GSA, our membership includes 26 different academic disciplines who all study some particular facet of aging with a life course orientation. We think that's particularly important on issues like trying to increase immunization rates across the life course. No one discipline can solve this challenge, but together we can make a meaningful difference. It also aligns with GSA's program of Concentric Value of Vaccinations as we age. This new program is intended to highlight the enormous value that vaccines bring to the US population. We often think of a vaccine as helping just one individual avoid one particular illness, when in fact it does so much more. Not only does it protect that individual from an illness, but it may also actually help that individual avoid other illnesses as a result.

Likewise, that vaccine may protect their family members from getting an infection or coworkers or members of their community. That one vaccine has an enormous economic impact and that's why we call it the Concentric Value of Vaccinations. The patient receiving that first vaccine is at the middle, and then you imagine these concentric circles around them that demonstrate the larger societal benefit of vaccines. We see the need for vaccines to be put in a position of reverence again, the way they have been in the past because of this enormous value they contribute.

Trish, I'd like to shift gears now and talk a little bit about recent CDC reports that have come out in recent years. There's been a decrease in the use of vaccines to prevent disease. Can you comment on that?

Patricia D'Antonio:
Yes, and, this is really unfortunate. Over the past several years following the COVID-19 pandemic, fewer people are taking advantage of vaccines as a way to reduce illness. That's what we call morbidity, or as a way to reduce death, what we often refer to as mortality. This is a shame because medical research has led to the development of these highly effective tools to keep us healthy. Some vaccines prevent more than 90% of illness for which they're used. One way that I think of vaccines are seat belts against disease. When I get in my car, I put on my seatbelt because research shows I'm much more likely to survive a car crash and to have fewer injuries if I wear my seatbelt. That same thing is true for getting your age-appropriate vaccines. They help you have less disease and reduce your risk of mortality.

James Appleby:
Does this decrease in use of age-appropriate vaccines impact healthcare costs?

Patricia D'Antonio:
It really does. Research shows that the economic cost of vaccine preventable illnesses is almost $9 billion each year. Think about what we could do with $9 billion. Most importantly of note is unvaccinated individuals are responsible for almost 80% of the financial burden related to vaccine preventable disease. This underscores the need to improve overall adult vaccination rates.

James Appleby:
Hearing about this decrease in vaccine uptake and the enormous impact on the economy as a result of individuals not getting vaccinated makes me want to ask, what are some strategies for improving age-appropriate immunization rates here in the US?

Patricia D'Antonio:
There are so many ways that we can work together to increase vaccination rates and increase how we can all thrive as we age. I can mention a couple here today. One thing that we have to recognize is how we can leverage technology. We can use communication channels such, such as text messaging or phone calls just to remind people to make their appointments to get their vaccination. The Electronic Health Record with practitioners can be used to enhance reminders and recall notifications to ensure that recommended vaccinations are delivered on a timely basis.

Another thing for us to remember is that we know that a strong recommendation to get vaccinated from a healthcare professional is essential. It's key to people often saying why they got their vaccine, right? This is one of the best predictors of vaccine acceptance and coverage. All healthcare professionals need to be part of this solution.

And lastly, I think it's really important for us to remember our trusted messengers in our community. There's a role for healthcare professionals, there's also a role for those influencers in our communities who can continue to help to remind people about the importance of, as you said earlier, the reverence for vaccination and the reverence for everyone in our communities to keep people safe. I think that's really important for us as we move forward in trying to increase our routine vaccination rates this season.

James Appleby:
Thank you, Trish. This has been a wonderful podcast. The passion you have for this work is so evident. We've heard about ways to ensure that older adults have access to their age-appropriate vaccines, and the value that getting vaccinated has to the US economy. I'm so glad, Trish, that you're able to join me today and to share your insights and observations and the work that you do in this arena both here at GSA and your role with AVAC is so important. And we're so glad that you're leading that effort.

As a pharmacist, I'll end our podcast today with a strong recommendation to listeners. Given the several respiratory viruses circulating at this time of year, I recommend you get your age-appropriate vaccinations. Thank you to those listening to this podcast. We hope you found it informative and enjoyable.

This podcast received funding support from Pfizer. I encourage our listeners to check out other GSA Momentum Discussions podcasts and webinars in our library on GSA Enrich. Thank you. Have a nice day.

Announcer:
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