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FEATURED

Experts share COVID-19 vaccine information during forum

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Feb 28, 2021



Hamid

Journal screenshot by Jessica Wilt

A way to dispel questions and concerns surrounding the COVID-19 vaccine and a way to share information with communities of color, three experts in the medical field in various capacities spoke at a forum hosted virtually by the Eastern Panhandle alumnae chapter of Delta Sigma Theta on Thursday.

Dr. Akeza Teame, clinical trials professional Ghada Hamid and CCO of Odyssey Rehabilitation Center Ester Jones all approached the topic from various backgrounds in care.

The forum began with the trio delving into why there has been a disproportionate impact by COVID-19 on minorities. Teame began by saying the impact comes from two aspects: the nature of the infection — what kind of people it affects most — and ways minority communities are more susceptible.

The first aspect is addressed by those of advanced age or with underlying health conditions, while the second considers ideas such as inequalities in health care services, the virus coming at a time when those disparities were being discussed but not much action was being taken, according to Teame.

Hamid moved the focus to education and commonwealth gaps, jobs many minorities find themselves in having higher exposure or ones where time off cannot be taken for fear of losing income. She also addressed the exposure that comes with multi-generational homes or homes with many living together to reduce costs.

"There's a lot of factors in that sense," she said.

Jones wrapped up the point of conversation by acknowledging co-morbidities that tie into COVID-19 related deaths, such as high blood pressure and diabetes, as well as the thought many had early on in assuming COVID wouldn't affect them.

The discussion moved to the history of persons of color related to vaccination trials, a history that has instilled an uneasiness in trusting the current vaccine in some.

"In general, the vaccines are safe," Hamid said. "There are side effects, but they are safe."

Hamid posed the question of which is worse: the side effects of the vaccine or actually battling the virus?

"We understand why black and brown people are not confident with clinical trials or being vaccinated," she continued. "We all know about Tuskegee, and then you had other incidents as well."

Because of mishandled trials that hurt many various groups, medicine has found ways to prevent those abuses and standardize trials, Hamid discussing the International Review Board and FDA regulations that keep trials safe. She stressed the good in double-blind studies, which are required by governing bodies in trials, as well as the reviews trials must go through.

"There are a multitude of safe guards to say who actually gets treatment or not," Hamid said. "With COVID, specifically, the other aspect is the whole world is watching and working together on this."

That moved the forum into discussion of the record time in which the vaccine was approved and released and safety questions regarding the timeline.

Hamid explained the FDA put a halt on reviewing other drug and vaccines that were not lift threatening, the focus moving virtually solely to COVID. She added that the body lifted red tap and bureaucratic stipulations that typically slow down the process while still ensuring the safety of the vaccines.

"Scientists had already been working on (the vaccine)," she said. "Lots of trials had already been done."

Teame added the unprecedented amount of money being funneled into the research helped speed the process, too, before addressing the vaccine's effectiveness against the new emerging strands. He assured that the vaccine should have good coverage against those variants and that now that the vaccine has been released, it's more easily tweaked for those new types.

"Virus' mutate. That's what they do," he said, making note of the ever-changing flu that requires a new vaccine every year for individuals.

Jones addressed the side effects of the vaccine, working in the long-term care field. She said most residents did not have side effects, those seeming to affect younger people more. She added that those side effects have not been bad and that they have seen fewer cases in facilities since the vaccine.

Jones stressed the need to continue practicing mitigation protocol until herd immunity is reached, urging everyone to still physical distance, wear masks and sanitize frequently.

"There's a lot of misconception out there," she said.

Moving to if schools are safe to open, both Hamid and Teame answered with personal beliefs of no, not yet, while Jones said it should be on a localized level to decide, stressing the importance of gradation in reopening.

The trio wrapped up with a few small key points. Jones reminded that in almost all cases, the vaccine should be free and to urge anyone with reservations about taking the shot to get past those. She said to look at it from a "I can do it if" mindset, not a "I can't because" one. Hamid stressed the need for continued education, while Teame noted the need for education and advocacy to not stop with the pandemic.

"The pandemic will pass, but the other health care issues are going to stay with us," he said.

