

Vaccine Communication:

Honesty and Analogy

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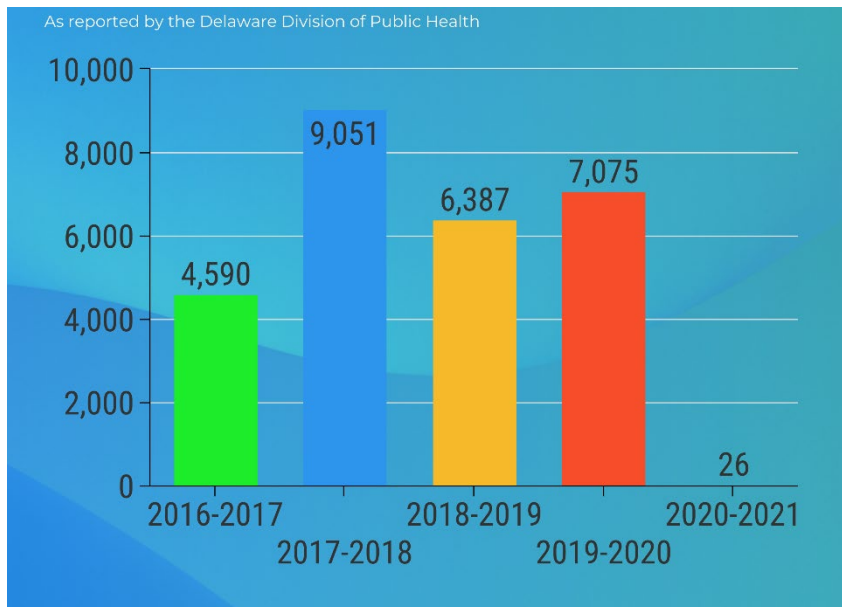
Publisher, Delaware Journal of Public Health

While it is true that there are some people who will probably never get vaccinated for COVID-19 (and perhaps not for anything else either), I have found some success in swaying people's opinions and actions by honesty and by analogy.

But first, I want to make an observation about the last two year's flu seasons in Delaware compared to the years leading up to 2020 (see Figure 1). According to the Delaware Division of Public Health¹ every year in the United States, on average:

- 5% to 20% of the population gets the flu;
- More than 200,000 people are hospitalized from flu complications, and;
- About 36,000 people die from flu.

Figure 1. Delaware Influenza by Year¹



What was different about the 2020-2021 flu season? Masking, handwashing, social distancing, lack of large crowd gatherings, and (presumably) flu vaccinations. While an epidemiologist can (and has) delve into the data to tease out meaning and causation, the bottom line is that radical lifestyle changes and protective measures had an equally impressive impact on flu morbidity and mortality. I've committed these numbers to memory and pull them out when someone wonders about the efficacy of these controls. Often that represents the "ah ha" moment that public health interventionalists seek.

I have also had success with using analogies to other known behaviors. A favorite is the "Safety Belt" analogy. I start by asking the person if they use a safety belt. According to the National

Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the national rate of safety belt use in 2021 was at 90.4%.² That is an impressive and important level of compliance. I ask, does wearing a safety belt prevent a car accident? Most often the answer is, correctly, “no.” Then I pivot the conversation – “Then why wear a safety belt?” I ask. “Because I don’t want to get injured, my child injured, etc.” “Exactly!” I exclaim. Getting a vaccine might not prevent the accident, but it can and does significantly reduce the risk of injury or death.

What are your success stories in communicating to your friends, colleagues, customers, clients, and patients? If nothing else, we must meet people where they are, with understanding and a factual tool chest of communication strategies to get that shot in the arm, the mask on the face, and our numbers of vaccination of preventable disease incidents down. It’s public health, it’s what we do.

References

1. Delaware Division of Public Health. (n.d.). Delaware weekly influenza surveillance reports. Retrieved from <https://dhss.delaware.gov/dhss/dph/epi/influenzawkly.html>
2. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (n.d.). Seat belts. Retrieved from <https://www.nhtsa.gov/risky-driving/seat-belts>

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