

When MI Saves Lives: Motivational Interviewing Unclogs Barriers to COVID Vaccine Deliberation Conversations

Our Afro-Caribbean East Flatbush community had a 10% higher COVID-19 mortality rate than NYC, yet fewer residents were vaccinated (46.37% vs 57.68%) (1). Motivational interviewing (MI) reduces defensiveness, provides information, and enhances personal agency around vaccine hesitancy (2). We used MI to elicit patient perspectives around COVID vaccination and engage patients in addressing vaccine ambivalence in our safety-net primary care practice. 5 preclinical students engaged in MI training focused on vaccine deliberation, learning techniques in reflections, affirmations, ask-respond-tell loops and goal setting. Faculty observed student-patient MI conversations during primary care visits with unvaccinated patients. Students started with an open ended question: "Tell me what you think about the COVID vaccine?" Pre- and post-MI intervention, patients were asked: "How ready are you to receive the vaccine today?" (readiness ruler: 1=Not at all ready, 10=Extremely ready) and "What is getting in the way of making the choice to become vaccinated?" Post-intervention, patients were asked if they felt heard, and had their concerns addressed. Student comfort and confidence in performing MI and self-awareness around personal emotion and bias was measured after each patient interaction. 53 patients (30% male), ages 21-91 participated. A paired T-test showed vaccine readiness improved post-MI from 4.32 to 5.72; $t(52) = -4.344$, $p < 0.005$. Top reasons for deliberation were waiting(16), misinformation(9), fear of conflict with pre-existing health concerns(6). 77% patients were satisfied with student performance (≥ 8 on 10 pt scale); 98% felt heard. 100% students were comfortable and 92% confident using MI. 100% noticed the impact of personal bias; 95% recognized their own emotions when discussing vaccination. A structured and reproducible MI tool uncovered patient concerns and enhanced communication, decreasing COVID vaccine deliberation. Reducing disparities begins with engagement.