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Behind Your Clinical Practice

MNA Position Statement on Covid-19 Vaccine Requirement and Other Strategies to Combat The Covid Pandemic

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in the deaths of over 4 million people globally, over 600,000 nationwide, according to the WHO's Covid dashboard. The death toll for Massachusetts is over 18,000 (USA Facts). The MNA represents nurses and non-nurse healthcare professionals working in various settings across the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Our healthcare professionals are represented in over 60% of the acute care hospital facilities statewide managing the seemingly relentless waves of suffering caused by the pandemic. For months our members witnessed and experienced firsthand the devastation that the coronavirus has had on our families, colleagues, neighbors, and communities. As healthcare providers charged with administering care in the initial chaos at the emergence of the novel coronavirus, our members bear the physical trauma of bodies worked and taxed beyond their limits and mental trauma borne from the helplessness of not being able to prevent the overwhelming suffering and death experienced during the initial phases (Carmassi et al, 2020). We "Healthcare Heroes" have suffered the loss of colleagues who succumbed to the virus as they put themselves in harm's way to treat others, separating themselves from their own families and friends, risking themselves to care for others (Hakan & Lucey, 2020). The resulting physical and mental trauma has taken a toll on all care providers and our healthcare systems. This ongoing trauma is now manifested by burnout, resignations/retirement, self-medication, and suicides (D'Ettorre et al, 2021; Feinstein et al, 2020).

The emergence of the Covid vaccines provided much-needed hope and relief. However, the emergence of the Delta and other more contagious variants as well as hesitancy around vaccine acceptance threatens to undo the hope for a return to some new sense of normalcy. We are again forced to watch as our hospitals and ICUs are overwhelmed by our stricken community members. We are again forced to witness the anguished cries of families as they stand vigil over cherished loved ones gasping for breath as they struggle to recover and, in many cases die from what now in many cases can be preventable effects of Covid (Rendall, 2021). The MNA believes that we are ethically, morally, and professionally obligated to work collectively to reduce further harm to our members, patients, and communities. To that end, we believe it is imperative that we use all available tools to reduce the ongoing harm being inflicted by the continued unchecked transmission of the Covid-19 virus.

Covid Vaccination an Important Tool for Ending the Pandemic

To date worldwide, over 5 billion doses of some version of Covid-19 vaccines have been administered, with over 366 million doses administered in the U.S. (Bloomberg, 2021). No other vaccines in U.S. history have endured the level of testing and ongoing scrutiny as the Covid vaccines approved for use (Safety of COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC). Within the large sample of millions of individuals receiving the vaccines, although moderate to mild temporary side effects appear to be common and expected, severe adverse effects, while significant

to the suffer, have proven to be statistically rare (Safety of COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC).

The U.S. approved Covid vaccine options include a traditional viral vector-based vaccine, Johnson and Johnson, with a mechanism of action consistent with commonly known vaccines, such as those that inoculate against chicken pox and measles (Different COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC;). The other approved Covid vaccine options are the Pfizer-BioNTech & Moderna, mRNA-based vaccines (Different COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC). The mRNA vaccines have been met with skepticism by many who mistakenly believe that it is a new unproven technology; however, mRNA vaccine technology has in fact been in research and development and clinical use for decades. In the past this vaccine technology has mainly been focused on cancer therapies. The emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 in 2002-2003 highlighted the urgency to study mRNA vaccine therapies to address the then emerging risk of viral pandemics. Because of this decades long research, the scaffold of the mRNA technology was available to be deployed to meet the urgent need in this Covid pandemic (Oligonucleotide Therapeutic Society).

Information continues to evolve, and researchers are gaining new insights and information daily. After more than 12 months of use in trials, and more than eight months of widespread use in the general public, and with millions of doses administered globally, the vaccines have proven to be relatively safe and highly effective in preventing hospitalization and death (Rendall, 2021; Safety of COVID-19 Vaccines | CDC). While there are still questions about the duration of natural immunity for those who have contracted Covid, as well as the duration of vaccine derived immunity, the Covid vaccines have proven to be a highly effective tool in achieving the goal of managing the pandemic by preventing severe cases resulting in hospitalization or death in most fully vaccinated people (Rendall, 2021).

MNA has been proactive and vocal in encouraging our members to get vaccinated against the Covid-19 virus. Early adoption by MNA members is evidenced by the fact that some unionized MNA hospitals have already achieved 90% or greater compliance among MNA members. However, while the great majority of MNA members have adopted Covid vaccination as an important mechanism for combatting the current Covid pandemic, we understand this has not been the case for all MNA members or for many forward-facing workers in other disciplines and positions. The reasons for this

are varied including missteps and bad choices made by employers in the early stages of the pandemic. This in addition to ongoing biases and discriminatory practices endemic in the healthcare system has resulted in many employees having lost trust in their employers. This distrust in conjunction with the panic and uncertainty that the continuous stress of the pandemic has had on our collective psyche, the deluge of misinformation, and the understandable shifting nature of emerging information, has left many individuals with doubts and anxiety related to the safety of what they believe to be new technology.

All medications including the Covid vaccines carry some level of risk (COVID-19 vaccines - Harvard Health; Possible Side effects from Vaccines | CDC). However, the known risk of short-term and long-term harm from exposure to the virus itself overshadows documented transient mild side effects and in very rare incidents severe adverse effects from the vaccines (Post-COVID Conditions | CDC). In light of new variants resulting in surges that threaten to once again overwhelm our healthcare systems risking the health of our communities, and colleagues, MNA supports requiring FDA approved Covid vaccinations for healthcare workers subject to religious and medical exemptions, as well as focused attention to mitigating systemic barriers to access and widespread adoption.

If required, the Covid-19 vaccine will be one of many already required of nurses and non-nurse healthcare professionals. These include vaccines that protect against highly contagious infections such as Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (Adult occupational immunizations Massachusetts recommendations and requirements, MDPH). Like generally preventable diseases, the Covid-19 infection and variants have been proven to be highly communicable if untreated or managed with vaccination and other mitigation. Given the fact that patients entrusted to our care are already immunologically compromised and are at greater risk for contracting the highly contagious emerging variants of the Covid-19 virus, MNA supports Covid-19 vaccination be added to the list of vaccines required for healthcare workers provided that they be given the right to choose between traditional viral vector option or mRNA vaccine option and medical and religious exemptions are approved.

Vaccine as One Part of the Solution

Vaccines are only one part of the solution. Other proven Covid-19 protocols must be universally promoted by healthcare facilities with as much vigor as vaccination requirements. Healthcare employers must restore trust and establish standards that will improve education, and access with the goal of increasing adoption and ensuring safe conditions for healthcare workers and patients. To this end, employers should:

- Create culturally competent educational modules and deploy trusted staff or surrogates to educate staff about the hazards and effects of the Covid-19 virus and create spaces for staff to ask questions and have their concerns heard.
- Make the vaccines available at the worksite and on work time and offer the option of mRNA based or traditional Viral Vector vaccine options.
- Assure time off without loss of pay or without the staff member having to use their own sick or earned time in the event employees experience the expected short-term mild symptoms that result from the body's production of antibodies after receiving the required vaccine.
- Refrain from stigmatizing staff who have already been traumatized by the experience of working through Covid and are anxious and need reassurance and space to access information with the goal of decreasing anxiety related to taking the Covid vaccine.
- Proactively assist their workers to access resources such as workers' compensation or other relevant assistive programs in the event the employee experiences any incidents of rare but potentially significant adverse effects after receiving a required Covid vaccine.
- Establish plans and procedures to collect data for those workers who do have significant side effect(s) or impacts and need for further support following vaccination. Each facility should have a plan to report out this information.
- Ensure access to appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and provide workers with replacements daily or more frequently, as needed in alignment with infectious disease standards for the safety of healthcare workers and their patients.
- Create education and training in languages understood by all staff regarding workplace policies and procedures implemented to protect workers from

Covid-19 hazards. <https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework#about-covid-19>

- Establish protocols for routine cleaning and disinfection and where necessary enhanced cleaning protocols.
- Confirm ventilation systems are properly maintained <https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework>
- Ensure safe staffing levels to ensure safe patient care and decrease spread.
- Implement regular testing protocols for staff.
- Implement protocols for screening and limiting the number of visitors to reduced spread.

The Covid-19 vaccines are a critical tool in our fight against the pandemic. By applying diverse public health strategies, ensuring best safety practices inside health-care facilities, and working together on education and equitable access, we can drastically reduce the danger of Covid-19 in our communities and finally put an end to this pandemic.

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