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I Would Be Scared if I Heard That Too

“Doctor, what do you think about the COVID vaccine? Is it good for me?” Monica, a hardworking nursing assistant and Latina mother of three, asked me in clinic. She had declined the vaccine when offered it through work a few months prior. “I’m scared,” she said with a tear sliding down her cheek. She was 33, struggled with advanced diabetes, and had family who were struggling to fight COVID-19. “I’m worried it may affect my ovaries after what I read on Facebook and on my family WhatsApp group.”

I took a deep breath and slowly exhaled underneath my blue surgical mask, listening carefully to every word. It was April 2021. Over the last two years, I had built a strong relationship with Monica. Diabetes had dramatically altered her life and while she prioritized earning a living to care for her family, she suffered some unfortunate complications. Through the tough times, our team was there for her. Now, she was turning to me as her primary care doctor to help her through a vulnerable, uncertain moment.

In clinics, hospitals, churches, and communities across the country, there were many individuals like Monica. Some had questions about how the vaccine was developed and others were exposed to inaccurate anti-vaccine content on social media leading to fear, angst, and frustration.

Addressing vaccine hesitancy and misinformation is challenging. My colleagues and I came together and started This Is Our Shot and VacunateYa, a grassroots social media movement that elevates the voices of medical professionals to build vaccine trust and combat misinformation.^{1,2} Multidisciplinary collaborations with medical professional organizations, cybersecurity scientists, public health professionals, community-based organizations, and non-profit organizations were critical to our success.

First, we identified that nearly 85% of Americans trust their own doctor or health care provider when it comes to COVID-19 vaccines.³ We started with multidisciplinary collaborations within medicine by bringing together doctors, nurses, pharmacists, and medical students by reaching out to peers and professional organizations such as American Nurses Association. They are some of the most trusted messengers to reach patients.

Second, we collaborated with the Virality Project, a coalition of research organizations led by the Stanford Internet Observatory that detects and analyzes social media mis- and disinformation in real-time by utilizing tools to monitor trending false narratives. This helped inform us of what we were up against.

Third, we collaborated with Purpose and El Autobus, two creative agencies, to develop thoughtful, social media branding for #ThisIsOurShot and #VacunateYa. Their design expertise was invaluable and enabled us to develop viral social media campaigns around holidays like Valentine's Day.

Fourth, we paired learnings from behavioral science, motivational interviewing and the COVID-19 messaging research by the Kaiser Family Foundation, COVID Collaborative, and the deBeaumont Foundation to develop a novel "3-5-3 Method" for effective COVID-19 vaccine conversations.⁴ The first three steps help to initiate the conversation through active listening, emotional validation, and assessing personal motivation. We share five key evidence-based messages to use during the conversation to address common vaccine-related questions and sources of hesitancy. The final three steps assist with ending the conversation by acknowledging personal autonomy, maintaining open communication, and helping to facilitate vaccination when appropriate. We trained over 4,250 medical professionals on this method in partnership with the California Department of Public Health and the Public Health Institute.

Finally, we partnered with over 30 community-based non-profit organizations and coalitions pairing local leaders with medical professionals to share accurate, scientific messages about COVID-19, vaccines, public health, and to answer live questions, virtually, during times of uncertainty.

Through This Is Our Shot and VacunateYa, I have witnessed the power of multidisciplinary collaborations. They made us stronger, opened our minds to new ideas and knowledge, and led us to approach the complex challenges of vaccine hesitancy and health misinformation in unique ways. I firmly believe that we all must work together to address vaccine hesitancy and health misinformation. That includes engaging with policymakers and social media companies to address misaligned incentives in our current information ecosystem.

"I hear you. I would be scared too if I heard that," I said calmly to Monica. "The COVID vaccine will keep you safe so you can care for your children." I shared my personal vaccine experience, discussed known side effects, addressed her fertility concerns, and left the choice to her.

One week later, Monica received her first vaccine.