

SPECIAL FEATURE

My experience as a foundation dentist administering the flu vaccine

By Holly Ridpath, Foundation Dentist, Sheffield, UK

Starting my career in the middle of a global pandemic was always going to be challenging and frankly a little strange. I came into my FD year full of hope and optimism for putting the skills I had acquired at dental school to good use. Naïvely, I thought I would be able to gain lots of patient experience. Alas, that would not be the case. Many afternoons triaging patients left me feeling a little lost and thinking ‘what a different start to my career this is’. The rumblings and rumours started in September that we, as FDs, may be administering the flu vaccine. September turned to October and finally in November we were redeployed one day a week to give the flu vaccine.

overwhelmed with the sheer quantity of patients and making sure I had an understanding of their medical history. I was placed on the ‘under 65 at risk’ clinic; the sorts of patients that would be vulnerable to getting a bad case of flu if they had it. Most patients had some sort of respiratory condition such as asthma or COPD. Some were more complex such as uncontrolled diabetics and stroke patients. This was such an eye opener to me. Through the sheer volume of patients, I found my skills at recognising what conditions had which medications and how that impacted on the vaccine treatment were drastically improved over a very short period of time.

As the weeks went on, giving the vaccines



there were many occasions where I came across patients who were incredibly resistant. I would always say to them ‘this is ultimately your choice’, and it is. In my head was the thought ‘I know I would rather a vaccine than the thought of going to hospital for the flu’. I heard it all from ‘I don’t like foreign things in my body’ to ‘what’s the point, I’m never going to get flu anyway’. This is where fast and efficient patient management is important. Considering I had three minutes a patient, it was vital to get the message across quickly about the benefits of having the vaccine as well as understanding and talking through their concerns. Most people, when in the chair and faced with a free of charge vaccine, were happy to have it with some gentle persuasion. ‘Vaccine-avoiders’ are a cohort that I don’t think are going anywhere soon. These seemingly educated people were being convinced by articles that they had read mostly on Facebook. As a dental profession I think this is something we need to be aware of as, in my experience, this attitude seems to be gaining traction.

I have completed my training to give the COVID vaccine and am hopeful that in the next few weeks I will be able to do so. As dentists I feel we can sometimes be overlooked in our important role in public health. Providing the vaccines has given me a real insight into the benefits we can provide to the general public. Overall, I am looking forward to how we can help in the next stage of the COVID journey and hope we can make an important contribution. ■

‘I loved being able to think that I was helping in a small way in assisting with the pandemic’

My placement was in South Yorkshire, about a 30-minute drive from my practice. I was assigned a rural GP practice along with another FD. When we arrived at the GP practice the staff were pleasantly surprised to see that their very busy flu clinics had an extra pair of hands. The nurses, doctors and management were pleased and relieved that we were there to help. We had a whistle-stop tour of the practice and were shown to our rooms. We were set up in side-surgeries and were given an incredibly long list of patients and a box of vaccines. The nurses gave us a little induction as to how to administer and the sorts of questions to ask beforehand. And we were off, three minutes a patient and a box of vaccines. At first, I was totally

became a highlight of my week. I loved being able to think that I was helping in a small way in assisting with the management of the pandemic. A couple of weeks in we were switched to the 50–65 years age group once all the at-risk patients had been vaccinated. This was a turning point as this was a totally different demographic of patient. In contrast to the ‘at risk’ group, many of these patients had never had a flu vaccine before. This is when I encountered the antivaxxers or maybe better categorised as the ‘vaccine-avoiders’. I was astonished by the number of people I encountered who were very sceptical about having the vaccine. I understand some trepidation, particularly if you’ve never had one before. However,