

What Are We Missing? Easier to Immunize - Part 1



PODCAST 20

SOUND BITE, Ms. Katie Towns:

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00:30

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

The writers and educators at Medavera were interested in getting a local perspective on childhood immunizations, so we contacted Ms. Katie Towns, the Director of the Greene County Health Department in Springfield, MO, our home base. Ms. Towns has been the public face of municipal support for the COVID-19 vaccination program in Springfield. No stranger to vaccination rollouts, she participated in distributing influenza vaccines during the 2009 H1N1 viral outbreak.

Hi, Ms. Towns. Welcome to *On Medical Grounds*.

Ms. Katie Towns:

Hello, thank you for having me.

01:10

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

August must be a busy month for the Greene County Health Department. Tell me about the department's role in helping children receive their recommended immunizations prior to starting the school year.

Ms. Katie Towns:

August is definitely a busy month. It's busy for multiple reasons, one of which is the fact that we are preparing for back to school and that also always brings about a busy season for us and helping to make sure that kids have the vaccinations that they need to be ready to go to school.

We are very fortunate here in our community. We're sort of a mid-sized city, but we have three very strong health care partners; two hospital systems in Cox Health and Mercy, and a federally qualified health center called Jordan Valley Community Health Center. And we partner with all three of these agencies to make sure that there are multiple opportunities for people to get their kids scheduled or have quick easy access to make sure that the immunization schedule is up to date. And so we are now, through the COVID response, have a new tool that we have connected all of these opportunities into our Vaccine417.com website so that people can access many different opportunities in one place to find out how to best suit their needs and get their kids vaccinated.

02:43

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

Have you seen any reductions in childhood immunizations?

Ms. Katie Towns:

Unfortunately, yes, this is a trend that has been sort of headed in the wrong direction for several years now. Earlier this year, the CDC did release new data that showed that state required childhood immunizations in kindergartners had dropped by one percentage point during the 2020 to 2021 school year. Obviously, that doesn't sound like much, maybe to folks, but it is a very concerning trend for public health officials because things like vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles have started to make a resurgence in the past years, where in 2019 we had the most cases that have been reported since 1992 with over 1200 individual cases. And unfortunately, with a disease like measles, you know we all experienced how transmissible COVID was, but measles is far greater in terms of its ability to jump from the host to other people that can be infected to the fact that it can expose or it can contract in 90% of the people who are exposed to the illness, so we have a lot of concern about the trend that we're seeing in regards to this slipping in our immunization rates. And that's something that we're working really diligently on and have a renewed sense of understanding on really what, how it can impact our culture as well as our schools.

04:34

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

You mentioned a few just now, but what are some barriers to getting parents to bring their kids in for vaccinations?

Ms. Katie Towns:

Yeah, so I think a lot of people have seen that there are lots of things that are sort of playing against us in terms of getting people as well as, specifically children, vaccinated. One of the biggest things that we are working hard against is misinformation and disinformation. Parents have expressed concerns over long term side effects of vaccines and that actually began many, many years ago with very false claims being tied to things that were not true in terms of the aftereffects of a vaccine. But I think the other the other side of that issue is that folks have lost sight of how ill some of the communicable diseases that vaccines prevent against can actually make your children, and we have been fortunate in the past several decades that our culture and our society has not been subject to many communicable disease outbreaks, because immunizations have done such a good job of controlling those outbreaks.

So I'm concerned about how we are headed in this direction of vaccines, the hesitancy that we're experiencing, but also then the impacts that we will see if we slip below certain points where those diseases start to really take off and create a lot of illness across many different aspects of our society.

06:12

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

How does your staff deal with vaccination hesitancy or refusal?

Ms. Katie Towns:

So we do a lot of things. We definitely work to understand and really seek information from individuals who are presenting in our clinics and are seeking an exemption.

There are medical exemptions that are offered to folks through the state. But when we when we consult with people who are seeking medical exemptions, we really try to get to the heart of the issue and that often means a one- on-one conversation to understand where their hesitancy is coming from. Many times it can be a conversation about how their individual situation or their child has a very specific illness or has had a situation in their past medical history that they are concerned with and those are real fears.

As a parent, I can understand that and I think when we are able to really get to the heart of the issue and then establish ourselves as a trusted, reliable source, we are often able to overcome some of those hesitations that people are experiencing, but it is cutting through a lot of clutter that people are seeing in the media and false information that is clouding their judgment.

So it takes some real diligence and really applying an understanding lens to the situation and helping them move past some of that bad information that's out there.

07:50

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

Tell us more about the Vaccine417 program.

Ms. Katie Towns:

Yeah, so we're really proud of this program. It was launched as part of the COVID-19 response. You know, one of the things that we have worked very diligently on here at our department is to make sure that there were good conduits for information so that people could seek that information from one source and then be able to use that and apply it to their lives. So through the course of the pandemic, we offered that in many ways.

One way was a call center and we got that up and running and have had that throughout the past two years so that people can call and it's a one-stop shop. But through that we've also been able to learn a lot about what people are seeking and one of the things that they asked for over and over was one place where they could find all of the opportunities for COVID-19 vaccines in our community and around our area. So we responded to that by creating a Vaccine417.com website that offered basically a calendar of not only our events, but any opportunity that was available to people. And what we did was we just translated that as we moved into school, back-to-school events, and we've now created, you know other vaccine opportunities that are offered and we have aggregated all of that information into that Vaccine417.com platform. So people are able to find out where back-to-school vaccine events are happening and other information related to, you know, all different aspects of the vaccines that are required now of children. So we encourage people to use that and take a look and find what's best for their needs.

09:48

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

We usually think of early childhood vaccinations when we speak of pediatric immunizations, but teens also require regular vaccinations. What vaccines are needed to prevent disease in these older children?

Ms. Katie Towns:

Yeah, so many times it's easy to sort of forget about how as your kids grow up we still need to get them into a yearly visit with their physician to make sure that their vaccines are updated. Obviously, that's one aspect

of care. There's many other things that an annual visit can help to keep your child healthy and we highly recommend that every year on your child's birthday, that that be an indicator to help refresh memory about getting them plugged into their healthcare provider for a yearly routine visit.

But as children get older, things like Tdap, to make sure that they are protected from tetanus, which can be, you know, a cut and or a nail or anything like that. That often happens with just working around the house, helping their parents out. It can help prevent them from needing to do a rush to the emergency room to get that tetanus shot updated. Things like HPV, and meningococcal, and now COVID-19, and an annual flu vaccine are all things that we recommend as children grow up.

11:17

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

Well, a birthday is an important milestone and easy to remember, so I think that's a great strategy. I have read that there are parents who have become vaccine hesitant with COVID who were not before.

Are you seeing older children and adolescents who received infant vaccines but now the same parents are vaccine hesitant for further vaccines?

Ms. Katie Towns:

We haven't seen necessarily documented evidence that correlates the two, but you know, we have definitely experienced a lot of the hesitancy or even the backlash associated with the COVID-19 vaccine. And one of the things that we've really worked on is trying to meet people where they are and a way that we've done that, is to do the best we can to separate the two issues.

So we have provided COVID-19 vaccine and then we also obviously are still doing what we can to make sure that kids can access and that we overcome hesitancy with other immunizations as well.

A good example is that last weekend we participated in a back-to-school event and there were a lot of people in our community who came out to get their children immunized and we provided COVID-19 vaccines. And then we worked with our other partner agencies where they were distinguished and separate from us, offering other childhood immunizations, and so even just that separation allows people to sort of navigate that without the discomfort, if they are hesitant, or want to seek more information before getting COVID-19 vaccine, were sort of separated from that issue to try and overcome the stigma in a different way. But those are just some small things that we're doing to really meet people where they are and just overcome some of that hesitancy that continues to be permeating.

13:15

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

How do we as a community protect our children from infectious diseases?

Ms. Katie Towns:

So we obviously use immunizations to do that, but I think the other part of what we have learned by the past few years is that there's a lot of good evidence still in just teaching good hygiene. And folks who are using hand washing within the classroom are going to prevent illness, not only COVID-19 or flu, but other just basic colds that kids get and strep throat, things like that, that are just going to transmit through a

classroom because kids are close, and we know that when human beings are packed together that disease has a better opportunity to spread, so using things like hand washing. And now I mean but one of the benefits of COVID, is that I've seen, you know, hand sanitizer and hand washing has been recommended to continue in many different places that I've been, so hopefully we'll all kind of continue down that road of making hand hygiene and other hygiene practices just more and more a part of our culture.

14:31

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

What is the biggest dilemma we face in keeping our schools safe?

Ms. Katie Towns:

You know, I think this is one of those questions that can be answered in many different ways and I guess at the end of the day I think that is ultimately one of the biggest dilemmas.

Schools are responsible for a lot of different things at this point. They are oftentimes a respite for children. They offer health care. They offer food. They offer a safe place to be and to learn. Children are getting counseling from their teachers, from their counselors, and you know all of those things add up to a lot of responsibility for how the school really shares in creating community and helping to make sure that they have a safe environment for kids to learn and to thrive.

And so I think what we have done in terms of the health department and what role we can play in that process is to really work with them closely to figure out ways that we can come alongside and be the partner that's advocating for immunizations and to do flu shots in the school, at school, so that parents don't have to take their kids out and do another stop at their doctor's office or whatever it might be. But if we can take some of that responsibility in terms of the immunizations or health care and really work to be the partner that has assumed some of that responsibility, I think it just allows the schools to focus on all the other aspects that they are providing in terms of many different pieces, but most importantly that education that kids need so much.

16:14

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

This is my final question, I promise, but an important one. What is keeping you personally up late at night?

Ms. Katie Towns:

Yeah, so I think in public health one of the tricks of our jobs is that almost any issue that our society faces can be related back to health of some sort and I think we wrestle with how you prioritize all of the health needs of a community.

But I think one of the biggest things that we are wrestling with currently is just the possibility of a resurgence in many different communicable diseases, because we have found ourselves in a different age of our culture, where individualism is definitely in many events taking a precedence over community needs, and so how we balance that individualistic approach with the needs of the community and how immunizations really work best when everybody is taking part in the process is a really hard thing to do, but I'm sure everybody you know that listens to your podcast has heard about the next communicable disease dilemma that we're facing with monkeypox.

And you know, those are things that we're trying to navigate that while we are also facing lots of different stigma as well as hesitancy to vaccines or even just expertise that helps to keep people healthy and safe so the individualism, balanced with the community approach is the thing that sort of, to me, can set-up a recipe for disaster for a resurgence in communicable disease. And I do worry about that.

18:10

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

Ms. Towns we appreciate your work as a county health official on the frontlines in the battle against infectious diseases. Thank you so much for taking time from your busy schedule to speak with us.

Ms. Katie Towns:

Thank you so much for having me and for really shedding some light on this issue.

Dr. Jane Caldwell:

And thank you for listening to the *On Medical Grounds* podcast. We know your time is valuable. The resources that we referred to in this podcast can be found at OnMedicalGrounds.com.

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