



## COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Among Inpatient Psychiatric Patients in Kansas City, Mo.

WHY DO MORE THAN 90% OF PSYCHIATRIC PATIENTS PLAN NOT TO BE VACCINATED?

By Val Bellman, MD; Nina Russell; and Shazia Saleem, MD

About 10% of adults residing in the greater Kansas City area have a severe psychiatric condition, and 40% of these individuals are not receiving treatment. According to The HSM Group of Scottsdale, Ariz., there are 94,478 cases of untreated psychiatric conditions in greater Kansas City, and the estimated total cost of untreated psychiatric conditions is as high as \$624 million per year, with a majority of costs being indirect.<sup>1</sup>

Research shows that patients with a mental health disorder are at increased risk of contracting coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and death.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, 673,964 people in Missouri have tested positive for the coronavirus, and more than 11,000 have died since March 2020.<sup>3</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the provision of psychiatric care and resulted in psychiatric bed shortages across the country. The Missouri Department of Mental Health statewide data has shown that 2,752 individuals connected with psychiatric facilities have tested positive for COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic; six staff and 13 psychiatric patients have died, but the actual total is still unclear.<sup>4</sup>

Truman Medical Center Behavioral Health (TMC BH) has continued to provide hundreds of patients with a comprehensive array of mental health and substance abuse treatments during the

pandemic. However, in response to the deadly COVID-19 surge, our units have stopped accepting new COVID-19-positive patients, and our consult team is providing intensive psychiatric services in general medical settings as an alternative to inpatient psychiatric care. Thanks to those efforts, we are able to continue offering psychiatric services to meet the needs of our underserved communities.

### ENCOURAGING VACCINATION

Although most—if not all—of TMC BH's mental health professionals are vaccinated against COVID-19, there has been great hesitancy for vaccination among our patients. Nearly every patient refuses vaccination when offered, even though every patient at TMC BH is eligible for vaccination and there are no legal barriers against vaccinating these patients. In fact, every provider offers the COVID-19 vaccine to patients.

To combat this hesitancy, our providers employ a teamwork-based approach. Our residents, attendings, students and staff members coordinate to provide encouragement for vaccination to our patients. Providers frequently field questions and concerns regarding the COVID-19 vaccine and educate patients about the benefits of vaccination. Often, providers engage with patients in one-to-one sessions to have dedicated, educational conversations

about the COVID-19 vaccine's efficacy in preventing morbidity and mortality.

Despite this effort to educate our patients on numerous fronts about the benefits of vaccination and the risks of COVID-19 infection, nearly all patients still refuse vaccination. Ascertaining why many patients refuse the COVID-19 vaccination even after receiving this information is challenging; however, understanding this situation is vital for the development of a plan to address this hesitancy.

### REASONS FOR HESITANCY

Vaccine hesitancy in the general population is heavily influenced by mistrust toward authority and society and general disregard for scientific evidence. It is posited that, since paranoid ideology and attitudes such as this are common in psychiatric disorders, these are likely to be factors among our patients who oppose vaccination.<sup>5</sup> The accelerated rate at which the vaccines were created and manufactured seems to be the preeminent cause of hesitancy.<sup>6</sup> According to a survey by QuoteWizard.com, 68% of unvaccinated individuals in Kansas remain hesitant because of their concerns regarding possible adverse effects and allergic reactions, and 28% of participants from Kansas did not think COVID-19 was a threat. In Missouri, 49% of unvaccinated people stated that

they do not trust the COVID-19 vaccine nor the U.S. government in general.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the most actively hesitant group was found to be adults aged 25–39, or socially active individuals.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, our observations align with prior research: More than 90% of our patients are not planning to be vaccinated. The reasons for refusing the vaccine vary from patient to patient, and include the newness of the vaccine, an aversion to shots and injections, and misinformation about side effects. Lorenz et al.<sup>8</sup> found that in people with mental illness, willingness to take preventative health measures (such as vaccinations) is directly related to their sense of risk, to the amount of peer support for the intervention, and to personal belief in the effectiveness of the intervention.

They also found that a considerable source of hesitancy was the misconception that a vaccine could cause the illness it is intended to prevent. Unfortunately, due to the complicated mechanism of action of both COVID-19 and the vaccines against it, efforts to explain how these vaccinations work are often in vain. This knowledge gap, as well as the lack of long-term efficacy and safety trials, opens the door for misinformation and fear.<sup>6</sup>

## CLOSING THE GAP

Going forward, to address vaccine hesitancy in patients with severe mental illness, there are steps to be taken by mental health professionals. Interventions should target both the individual and the system regarding hesitancy. Psychiatrists should continue to educate and support patients and provide opportunities for active engagement. Knowledge gaps and misinformation must be directly addressed, as data have shown that belief in misinformation is highly predictive of vaccine hesitancy and avoidance.<sup>5</sup> Mental health professionals must remain updated on new information regarding COVID-19 vaccine outcomes and be prepared to educate patients and address concerns if we are to close this knowledge gap. ☺

*Val Bellman, MD, is a resident in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine. He can be reached at vvzww8@umkc.edu.*

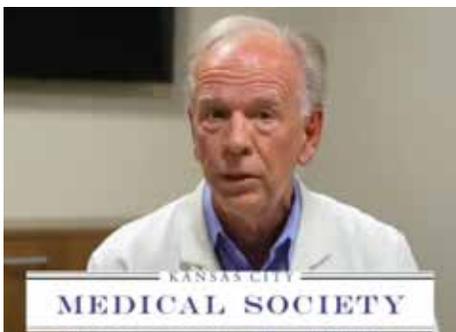
*Nina Russell is a fifth-year student at the UMKC School of Medicine and plans to apply for psychiatry residency; she can be reached at nrcc55@mail.umkc.edu.*

*Shazia Saleem, MD, is a staff psychiatrist at University Health and Truman Medical Center, and is a clinical assistant professor in the UMKC Department of Psychiatry. She can be reached at shazia.saleem@uhkc.org.*

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