

From the Eyes of a COVID-19 Vaccinator

Category: Behind Closed Doors, The Vaccine

written by Nadia Saif | April 2, 2021

This month, I had the opportunity to be a vaccinator at COVID-19 mass vaccination clinics. Volunteering at these clinics, referred to as PODs (Points of Dispensing), was a welcome shift from my daily life as a family medicine resident. This was my opportunity to see public health in action.

I traveled up to two hours to get to these clinics, relishing the opportunity to see more of my beautiful state of Virginia and to visit communities, often rural and remote, that I've never known about.

I vaccinated people in community centers, churches and through the windows of cars at drive-through events at high schools.

People often thanked me afterwards. I instinctively thanked them back, internally reflecting on the looming specters of vaccine hesitancy and variants, and what they would mean for our chances at reaching herd immunity. I quietly appreciated that every shot in an arm was a step closer to our goal.

People asked many questions. At times, I anticipated them and could rattle off answers based on my training and reading. Other times, I was forced to pause and reflect on how much we still don't know. Some were fearful of side effects and of the uncertainty of the vaccine's efficacy, while others were grateful, hopeful or relieved.

One particular memory captures how so many feel. Post-vaccination, a woman began tearing up. This had been a challenging year; her injection represented a transition, an inflection point. That day in March marked the "one-year mark" of the start of the lockdown for many, the start of a tortuous journey ahead.

There is still much left to be done. In my residency clinic, I encounter patients who are fearful of coming in for visits, patients who have struggled to get by amidst layoffs and virtual schooling, and patients with chronic conditions who've been isolated and homebound this year. I encounter loss, loneliness and sadness. I've learned about the population health issues that reach beyond my exam room: safe school reopening and return-to-school hesitancy among vulnerable populations; aligning changing COVID-19 guidance with timely communication to communities; the touchy intersections of business, government and public health.

There is still much left to be done, but working in the PODs was a refreshing glimmer of optimism to bookend an unprecedented and difficult year. An experience at a POD may be the much-needed medicine for our frontline healthcare workers to offer renewal and invigoration for the long road that still awaits.

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