



## CHAMPION CHAT FOLLOW-UP

Susan Sirota, MD, FAAP, Chair of PediaTrust, LLC, followed up with us about how she continues to achieve high vaccination rates in her network.

### How do you set up your COVID-19 vaccination program to be effective in the long-term?

The future of COVID-19 vaccines remains uncertain, but it is worth considering its similarity to annual flu campaigns, requiring updated formulations each fall. As flu season coincides with back-to-school rush, incorporating COVID-19 vaccines is essential. With our flu vaccine approach, we offer it to all visiting children and their siblings during the season, whether it is a well visit or any other reason. This strategy could work for COVID-19 vaccines, as well.

With COVID-19 vaccines, mass vaccination clinic setup may vary due to different age-specific vaccine requirements. Drive-by mass clinics have been successful in the past, offering easy scheduling, minimal administrative burden, and extended weekend availability.

### Reflecting on the past year and your achievements with high vaccination rates, how has your approach to COVID-19 vaccines changed?

PediaTrust has a large area of coverage around the North, Northwest, and West suburbs of Chicago. Fortunately, we have a vaccine policy at all locations, that requires all children to receive recommended vaccines in line with schedules published by the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). This has helped to set a strong narrative around the importance of vaccinating. Parents / caregivers understand that the decision to vaccinate is clear and basic. This allows to keep **ALL** patients walking through our clinic safe from vaccine preventable diseases.

We also push to vaccinate at all well visits. We want the narrative to be that COVID-19 vaccines are thought to be routine vaccines, similar to flu. Starting at 6 months of age, COVID-19 vaccines are recommended and thought of as **routine**. Additionally, we have a strong recall system set to ensure parents / caregivers receive reminders about routine vaccinations.

"Having a Vaccine Policy at PediaTrust helps to show the seriousness of vaccinating"



## What has been the biggest challenge with integrating COVID-19 vaccines in your clinic?

Fortunately, we have faced minimal challenges, especially related to vaccine supply. Thanks to our strong local health department ties, we were among the first clinics to receive vaccines in our community.

However, we anticipate COVID fatigue posing issues. Interest in COVID vaccines has waned, leading some initially vaccinated parents and children to believe they are fully protected. Yet, the reality is that the vaccines are working well and providing robust protection.

Commercialization introduces hurdles such as vaccine access and lack of pediatrician preparation. The lack of information on cost, credits to wasted / unused doses, and handling commercialized products impacts ordering. As a practice, we cannot afford to waste any doses with commercialized vaccines. Despite our aim to vaccinate, insurance fee schedule adjustments occur only a few times a year, leading to additional burdens put on providers that are unsustainable for our business. Currently, we are thankful to have purchased ultra-cold freezers to store health department ordered vaccines and are still fully vaccinating anyone who wants / needs a COVID-19 vaccine.

## Knowing physicians are trusted messengers, how do you leverage that to address vaccination and perhaps alleviate any vaccine hesitancy?

We spell it out to our patients that we want to be their trusted source of information, recognizing that not all sources can be relied upon. You want to establish a strong relationship with parents.

Telling patients  
"I want to be your  
trusted source of  
information."

The process begins by asking permission to discuss COVID vaccines and asking what they have heard thus far. Parents or

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patients typically express their concerns first, and it is crucial to listen and address those concerns. Asking, "What would you like to know about the vaccine?" can keep the conversation moving forward. It's important to remember that the journey to vaccinate is a marathon, not a sprint. The **"WIN"** does not always mean vaccination itself, but fostering open vaccine education discussions. Dismissing concerns could turn families away from vaccinating, being honest about the what you do not know is also important, as nothing is risk-free. Helping parents recognize the pros and cons can aid in having a balanced conversations.

Interestingly, while many parents quickly received vaccines for themselves when they rolled out, they may have hesitations when it comes to their children, particularly with COVID-19 vaccines. It's worth noting that hesitancy can differ between parents' decisions for themselves and for their children, as well as for other vaccines.

## With COVID-19 vaccine guidelines ever-evolving, how do you stay informed with current best practices and disseminate information to both staff and parents?

"Everyday our physicians huddle with their nurses to ensure all changes and guidelines are conveyed."

We rely on our trusted sources such as Illinois Chapter, American Academy of Pediatrics (ICAAP), AAP, and CDC for timely information. ICAAP has done a great job with providing valuable updates and resources for pediatricians, while AAP has shined with offering guidance in navigating COVID and vaccines.

We also have daily morning huddles to keep our staff informed about guidelines and recommendations. We maintain consistent network-wide communication on COVID-19 policies, masking, isolation, vaccine guidelines, storage / handling, etc. For easy access to vaccine schedules, clinical job aids are available on all in-office laptop homescreens across all practices. This guarantees staff access to current schedules without relying on printed versions that can become outdated.

## As we prepare for commercialization, how do you plan to continue facilitating a successful COVID-19 vaccination program?

As pediatricians, we need answers about commercialization to have a vaccination plan. These details are imperative to have a smooth transition and process to vaccinate children. There are many aspects that will need to be thought out in detail such as formulation, storage and handling, and ages accepted at mass vaccination clinics to name a few. Pediatric population vaccines vary by age, versus all adults have one vaccine. As some of the new formulations will still be manufactured in multi-dose vials, knowing how providers will be credited for unused / wasted vials would help to prepare for a successful vaccination program.

## Anything else you'd like to share?

"Child vaccination data can help providers create a strong recommendation to vaccinate."

Pediatricians need ongoing publications of data supporting child vaccination. While COVID affects the heart, lungs, and brain, further research is needed on its long-term consequences and vaccination benefits. Strong data encourages parental and peer support for vaccinations.

Insurance companies need to prioritize children. Pediatricians' historically low vaccine administration payment, before AAP's advocacy, highlights undervaluation of both pediatricians and children. Safeguarding children's health is crucial for our future!

**Thank you to Dr. Sirota and PediaTrust staff for being COVID-19 vaccine champions!**