

## **Physician Communication and Health Equity Efforts Play Significant Role in Fighting COVID-19 for African Americans in Mississippi**

Over the 40 years that Obie McNair, MD has practiced medicine, he has seen nothing like what providers are currently facing in fighting COVID-19 and disinformation around vaccination against it.

“People obtain information from various sources these days, he said, “Chat rooms, internet websites, and Facebook...there are more sources of information than ever before, and there is a lot of misinformation on the internet,” said Dr. McNair, a 33-year practitioner with community health centers.” He says his patients say “they said” when offering reasons for their hesitancy of getting the COVID-19 vaccine. His patients are referring to what is read online or hearsay, but is not necessarily written or published by trusted sources or verified by scientific evidence.

“ ‘They’ gives out a lot of bad info,” said Dr. McNair.

### **Hearsay, History, and Hesitancy**

Vaccine hesitancy stems from this misinformation, propagated by unchecked sources on social media sites being shared. But Dr. McNair says other factors create barriers in communities of color, one being mistrust. “Because of past atrocities of the [Tuskegee study](#), there is distrust of the system.” He explained hesitancy is also due in part to the speed in which the vaccines were developed, tested, and made available to the public.

To combat vaccine hesitance, one strategy is for providers to have first-hand experience in taking the COVID-19 vaccine and talking with patients about it. African American and providers of color, like Dr. McNair and physicians at Central Mississippi Health Services (CMHS) in Jackson, Miss., are setting a strong example for patients who may be skeptical, by getting the COVID-19 vaccination themselves.

“I educated myself about the vaccine. As someone who has been practice for a while, I am confident it is safe and effective,” said Dr. McNair. As for influencing patients...“I think I’ve been successful so far.”

### **Equity Through Education**

As Dr. McNair says, educating patients through doctor-patient relationships, along with peer-to-peer conversations expands patient knowledge and increases health equity in receiving the best health care. While leading efforts at the bedside for patients at Central Miss. Health Services, Dr. McNair along with CHMS physicians and community mentors are training the next generation of leaders through a mentorship program with the goal increasing equity among community health center patients. The REPAAIR/UPLIFT Health Equity project, led by CMHS in partnership with the Community Health Center Association of Mississippi, is bringing 10 college students from local HBCUs into community health center clinics to learn and led. Students will work with providers and patients on issues of health literacy and addressing food insecurity to specifically address health equity among CMHS patients.

### **Increasing Health Equity, Past and Present**

Health care access for African Americans and the underserved in Mississippi has a difficult past. Central Miss. Health Services CEO Robert Smith, MD played an instrumental role during the civil rights era, shining a light on the lack of access to health care for African Americans while providing medical services to activists during the Freedom Summer of 1964. He helped pioneer community health centers, which were created for medically underserved areas. Dr. Smith co-founded the first federally funded community health center in the U.S. in Mount Bayou, Mississippi that continues to operate today.

Dr. Smith's health equity leadership reverberates around the U.S. with the 1400 community health centers serving 3 million Americans in combating the COVID-19 pandemic. The Biden administration has tapped community health centers as COVID-19 vaccine access points. Community health center providers are trusted by their communities and know how to reach citizens in rural areas and those who have been disenfranchised by the health care system.

Today in Mississippi, over 70% of COVID-19 vaccines given at Community Health Centers are going to African Americans, according to the Mississippi Department of Health. "We have identified (Community Health Centers) as invaluable partners in this fight (against coronavirus)," said Thomas Dobbs, MD, State Health Officer of Mississippi.

### **Supply Not Currently Meeting Demand**

Dr. McNair says there is increased demand for the COVID-19 vaccine at the four CMHS clinics, but supply is not able to meet it. "The vaccines we have are going like hotcakes," said Dr. McNair, noting the supply chain getting enough vaccine to clinics is now the issue. The solution is for the federal government to "get the vaccine out to Community Health Centers and to providers in minority communities. "We could get people vaccinated."

Dr. McNair suggests for those who may be not sure about getting the shot to "keep an open mind, go to the medical experts who had experience with the vaccine, and trust the Lord who will lead in the right direction."