



University
of
Pittsburgh

School
of
Medicine

Difficult Conversations in the COVID-19 Era

Personal Enrichment Course

Spring 2021

<u>Course Dates:</u>	1/5, 1/12, 1/26, 2/9 (7-9PM)
<u>Maximum Students:</u>	No Limit
<u>Class Year:</u>	MS1 and MS2
<u>Course Directors:</u>	Andrew McCormick, MD mccormickaa@upmc.edu Andrew Nowalk, MD nowalk@pitt.edu
<u>Student Organizers:</u>	Hannah Butterfield butterfield.hannah@medstudent.pitt.edu Lucy Gabriel gabriel.lucine@medstudent.pitt.edu Christine Tin Joe Maggiore Isabel Bleimeister Ankit Sharma
<u>Registration:</u>	Denise Downs (ddowns@pitt.edu)

Description:

Learn to bridge the gap of mistrust between the medical establishment and the public through respectful communication, cultivation of understanding, and continual reevaluation of the medical establishment for areas in need of improvement. Students will gain communication skills to approach difficult conversations and will learn to apply these skills to conversations about vaccinations. Students will gain a basic understanding of the history and current attitudes of the anti-Vax movement, including engaging with actual members of that population. Furthermore, we will learn more about minority attitudes towards the testing and administration of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine, as well as whether fears and mistrust held by some minority communities have been addressed throughout the vaccine development process. Overall, we will learn the value of being leaders and advocates that combine empathy, understanding, and factual truth in pursuit of transformative conversations with our patients.

Requirements:

Attend all sessions, participate in an active and engaged manner.

Pre-Requisites:

None

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COURSE OUTLINE Difficult Conversations in the COVID-19 Era

Dates: TBA

Location: Zoom

Course Directors: Dr. Andrew McCormick and Dr. Andrew Norwalk

Session 1: Difficult Conversations. Didactic session focused on understanding why differing beliefs and opinions often incite anger and frustration, as well as how to recognize/manage our own emotions while having effective conversations that bring about change in ourselves and others. This session will outline a formulaic approach to difficult conversations and will also seek to answer questions such as:

- How do you recognize and manage your own emotions in a conversation where you and the other person fundamentally disagree?
- How do you share truth without being condescending or judgmental in a conversation when someone brings up misinformation?
- How can you engage in difficult conversations while simultaneously building upon and developing a relationship with the person with whom you disagree?

Students will observe a difficult conversation (could be related to vaccines or another issue) between a faculty member and Standardized Patient. Students will then role-play and practice the skills learned on each other. We will debrief at the end and discuss the emotions that we experienced during the conversations, and how we were able to manage and utilize these throughout the discussion.

Potential faculty: Dr. Bob Arnold

Prereading including: Confidant Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference: Chapter 5, 'Civic Aspirations – Tolerance, Humility, and Patience', by John D. Inazu
Excerpts from Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes are High, by Kerry Patterson

Session 2: When successful scientific advances are pushed aside by the public – a study of anti-Vax movements.

Part 1 - an individual with expertise on this subject (Dr. Nowalk) will speak on the history of the public's mistrust and resultant outbreaks, common misconceptions that the public has about vaccinations, and how to address these misconceptions. This discussion may cover topics including:

- An overview of the vaccine development
- Common concerns and misconceptions that people may have about what is being put into their bodies (as well as the data behind any actual risk behind these concerns)
- Instances when vaccine development and testing has gone wrong
- Data on risks/benefits of some current common vaccines
- Data on effective physician approaches to conversations surrounding vaccines

We should gain a fundamental perspective on *why* various conspiracy theories are wrong, so that we can make intelligent arguments when engaging with this patient population. We could also view & discuss relevant scenes from shows, such as 'Pandemic' on Netflix, which includes a thought-provoking scene with an Oregon court reading surrounding the MMR vaccination.

Part 2 – Engagement with "anti-Vax" and/or vaccine-hesitant individuals. This could take different forms, such as a guided interview over Zoom by a course facilitator (Dr. McCormick) with community members, leaving time at the end for questions, or one-on-one Zoom breakout rooms with medical students and "anti-Vax" individuals. Here we will seek to better understand where these individuals are coming from and may employ the communication techniques that we learned from Session 1. While we will learn material in this course demonstrating where these individuals have factual errors, the point of this discussion is not to paint these individuals as 'myopic' or mal-intentioned, but to learn where they are coming from so that we can address their concerns. By non-judgmentally listening to them and understanding their individual background and beliefs, we will be better able to have informed dialogue that addresses their concerns and allow us to partner with them in pursuing the best possible preventative care.

Homework: Writeup reflections on the session (guiding questions will be provided).

Prereading Including: Anti-Vax sites; scenes from relevant show such as *Pandemic* on Netflix; the original/debunked article claiming that vaccines are a cause of autism

Session 3: A study of the SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine – how to ethically develop and administer a vaccination while rebuilding trust with communities that have been marginalized and exploited by the healthcare system.

Part 1 – Center for Health Equity, Neighborhood Resilience Project, or individuals from Pitt Social Medicine Initiative speak about the history of misuse/marginalization of minority communities by the medical establishment, including discrepancies between therapeutic testing versus access. Additionally, the topic will focus on current attitudes of mistrust and whether this mistrust is being addressed in the development, distribution, and testing of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine.

Part 2 – one-on-one Zoom breakout rooms or facilitated Zoom interview in front of the class, with community members who are willing to share their experiences with medical students and how they feel their concerns are (or are not) being addressed with the current SARS-CoV-2 vaccination process. We could partner with the Neighborhood Resilience Project, a group that is seeking to address concerns and needs of minority groups in Pittsburgh, while garnering increased URM participation in COVID vaccine trials for this portion.

Homework: Writeup reflections on the session (guiding questions will be provided).

Potential faculty: Megan Freeman, Judy Martin

Prereading Including: 1Hood Media blog processing the pandemic with Black Pittsburgh communities; NYT Article: 'I Won't Be Used as a Guinea Pig for White People'; Washington Post Article: 'Coronavirus vaccines face trust gap in Black and Latino communities, study finds'

Session 4: Practical application, debrief and brainstorming.

Students will break into small-group rooms with Standardized Patients and will practice the skills learned throughout this course through engaging in simulated vaccine conversations. Students will then debrief on how the conversations went and will share reflections from the first three sessions. Discussion questions will cover topics such as:

- Techniques for difficult conversations that we found particularly helpful.
- What did we learn from discussing perspectives that challenged us?
- What do we see as the future of clinical trial design and conducting of medical innovations, considering an equitable inclusion of populations?

Additionally, we can take time during this class to address the role that social media and the internet has in the spread of misinformation, and brainstorm ways that we can address this (or use social media to our advantage) as future providers.