

Course Outline: Difficult Conversations in the COVID-19 Era

Layout: Four two-hour sessions, held over Zoom during Jan-Feb 2021

1/5, 1/12, 1/26, 2/9 (7-9PM)

Student Participants: MS1 & MS2 Students at PittMed

Course Directors:

Dr. Andrew McCormick, MD

Dr. Andrew Nowalk, MD, PhD

Student Organizers:

Hannah Butterfield

Lucy Gabriel

Christine Tin

Joe Maggiore

Sophie Wecht

Isabel Bleimeister

Ankit Sharma

Course Summary: Begin 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 reflect on internal emotions and dialogue that often prevent effective communication. Students will then apply these lessons to conversations surrounding vaccinations. Students will gain a basic understanding of the history and current attitudes of anti-vaccine movements, and will engage with individuals who exhibit anti-vaccine sentiment or vaccine hesitancy. Furthermore, we will learn about general attitudes and mistrust towards the testing and administration of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine and will listen to individuals hesitant to receive this vaccine. We will also learn about how mistrust of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine has manifested in the minority communities served by Casa San José and The Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh. This discussion will deepen our understanding of the historic and current events leading to this mistrust. Finally, we will have the chance to practice our skills of listening and communication with Standardized Patients exhibiting SARS-CoV-2 vaccine hesitancy. Overall, we will learn the value of being leaders and advocates who combine empathy, understanding, and truth in pursuit of transformative conversations.

Session 1: Difficult Conversations. Introduction of course, student course organizers, and course directors/speakers (5 mins). **Part 1 – Didactic session (40 mins)** led by Dr. Bob Arnold 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 difficult conversations. This session will outline effective approaches and common challenges during difficult conversations. Topics addressed will include:

- 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?

Q/A session following lecture **(10 mins)**

5-minute break

Part 2 – Dr. McCormick and Dr. Nowalk will begin the second half with a brief demonstration of ineffective and effective communication around vaccination using an SP for a model scenario. They will each demonstrate for about 10 minutes each counseling that is ineffective and then effective **(20 mins)**. The physician-SP dialogue will demonstrate & highlight the principles that Dr. Arnold shared, as well as a presumptive but collaborative approach to vaccine counseling. Students will then break out into small group rooms (6-8 students per room, including one student course organizer to provide discussion questions as needed and to call in Dr. McCormick or Dr. Nowalk if the group gets stuck or has a question). Students will discuss questions such as:

- What did the faculty member do that went well?
- How did the SP respond?
- How would we have responded?
- What would we have done in this situation?
- Did we experience any emotional reactions during the discussion?

(30 mins)

Students leave breakout rooms, followed by a brief overview in large group of how to prepare for Session 2 **(10 mins)**.

This session will set the stage for the rest of the course, as we will learn tools for approaching difficult conversations and managing our own emotions, while listening to the rationale behind other opinions. This should help to frame the fundamental goal of this course, which is to learn to have difficult conversations while listening to the voices of populations that represent our future patients and the communities we will be serving.

Faculty facilitators: Dr. Bob Arnold & Dr. Andrew McCormick/Dr. Andrew Nowalk

Student prep for Session 2:

- Survey will be sent out to collect student questions for speakers during Session 2 Part 2 - we will pre-screen all questions to ensure respect
- Look up the arguments and sites promoted by individuals and groups that demonstrate anti-vaccine sentiment
- Other prereading provided on Navigator LEC Session 2 Portfolio (Including: Anti-Vax sites; scenes from relevant show such as *Pandemic* on Netflix; Lancet article (now retracted) claiming that vaccines are a cause of autism; Project rescue; Moms against mercury; National Vaccine Information Center)

Session 2: When scientific advances are not trusted by the public - understanding anti-vaccine and vaccine hesitant populations. Part 1

- Dr. Nowalk will speak on the history of vaccines in parallel with 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
- Key data on the effectiveness of vaccines
- Common concerns and misconceptions that people may have about vaccination
- Vignettes of vaccine refusal around episodes of problems with vaccines (Cutter incident) as well as false data dissemination (Wakefield incident)
- 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 the evidence surrounding anti-vaccine views, so that we can answer questions and misconceptions when engaging with this population. **(40 mins)**
Followed by Q/A portion **(5 mins)**

5 min break

Part 2 – Engagement with individuals who exhibit anti-vaccine sentiment or vaccine hesitancy. Goal = 3 panelists. Dr. McCormick conducts a guided interview with panelists, allowing them to voice their beliefs and concerns. Dr. McCormick will pose additional pre-submitted questions from medical students. Panelist participants will have time to ask questions to Dr. Nowalk/Dr. McCormick as well. 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. **(40 mins)**

Small group breakout rooms afterwards to debrief (6 students and one student course organizer per room) **(25 mins)**. Then reconvene in large group to go over preparation for Session 3 **(5 mins)**.

Faculty facilitators: Dr. Andrew Nowalk & Dr. Andrew McCormick

Preparation for Session 3 –

- Common concerns surrounding SARS-CoV-2 vaccine and whether/how these concerns have been addressed
- Review CDC.gov COVID-19 Vaccination pages, popular science articles, and online forum discussions on SARS-CoV-2 transmission & vaccine to see how scientific information is presented to the public from various sources including pro-vaccine vs. vaccine hesitant
- Survey sent out for students to pre-submit questions for speakers during Session 3 Part 1

Session 3: SARS-CoV-2 Vaccine Mistrust & Hesitancy. Part 1 – Guided interview with a panel of individuals who have concerns surrounding the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine. Goal = 5-7 panelists. Interview will be conducted by Dr. McCormick & Dr. Nowalk. Panelist speakers will have time to share their concerns and views surrounding the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine, as well as their views and concerns about the intersection of public health, politics and society at large during the COVID 19 Era. Panelists may be asked additional pre-submitted questions from medical students. There will be time at the end for panelists to pose questions to Dr. McCormick & Dr. Nowalk. **(45 mins)**

Part 2 – Taylor Scott from The Urban League and Benjamin Gutschow from Casa San José will give a presentation **(30 mins)** followed by a Q/A session with students **(15-20 mins)**. Topics covered will include:

- Historic & current reasons for mistrust of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine and broader medical community in general by members of Latinx and Black communities
- Whether this mistrust is being addressed in the development, distribution, and testing of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine
- How a legacy of entitlement and superiority in medicine can keep us from earning respect from and building trust with our patients
- The ‘savior complex’ that can be exhibited by the medical establishment, and how this is perceived by the communities that Benjamin and Taylor are serving
- How we in medicine can keep ourselves and our colleagues accountable for maintaining trust with patients we care for throughout our careers

Small group breakout rooms afterwards to debrief (6 students and one student course organizer per room) **(25 mins)**. Then, large group to go over prep for Session 4 **(5 mins)**.

Prereading includes: 1Hood Media blog processing the pandemic with Pittsburgh’s Black communities; NYT Article: ‘I Won’t Be Used as a Guinea Pig for White People’; Pew polls about vaccine trust with comprehensive breakdown

Preparation for Session 4:

- Educational reading (e.g., published Nature article) on development, mechanism of action, and efficacy of SARS-CoV-2 vaccine to gain a factual understanding of how the vaccine works
- Talk to a friend or family member who is hesitant about the COVID vaccine to practice non-judgmental listening & hear another individual’s views

Session 4: Practical application, debrief and brainstorming. Part 1 - Students will break into small-group rooms with Standardized Patients (5-6 students/room) and will practice the skills learned throughout this course through engaging in simulated conversations surrounding the SARS-CoV-2 vaccine. **Part 2**- 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).

Following this session, debrief as a large group and selected small group speakers share key takeaways from the course.