Insights of Primary care Physicians of South Asian Descent In Addressing Barriers to COVID-19 Vaccination and Managing Vaccine Hesitancy

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Background

- SARS-CoV2 pandemic has claimed about 6.5-million lives worldwide. Despite the evolving nature of the virus, vaccines have proven to remain effective in preventing hospitalization and deaths.
- Unvaccinated individuals had 53.2 times the risk of COVID-19 associated death compared to fully vaccinated individuals with booster doses.
- Primary care physicians (PCP) of South Asian descent are clustered in large metropolitan areas in the United States and are serving a diverse group of patients, including those of AAPI (Asian American And Pacific Islanders) background.
- Research studies have explored very little into how these physicians are promoting COVID-19 vaccines in their medical practice.

Objective

- Our aim was to investigate how South-Asian PCPs have addressed COVID-19 vaccination status during busy clinical encounters and to what extent they have explored barriers to vaccination and vaccine hesitancy.
- We wanted to learn about their approach towards promoting vaccination, their opinions and advice on increasing vaccination rates, and reducing vaccine hesitancy in the primary care setting.

Methodology

- We conducted a cross-sectional study by developing a 25-item survey instrument to assess our objectives. The last survey item was an open-ended question to capture general suggestions from the physicians.
- We used Google Forms to construct the online survey and then performed face validity prior to use.
- We primarily sent email invitations to physicians of South Asian descent. BMANA was the dominant source for recruiting many Bangladeshi PCPs.
- The enrollment period spanned from January to March 2022 for 6 weeks.
- We reported descriptive statistics about the survey respondents’ demographics, region of practice, practice setting, and other practice related variables.
- Chi-square analyses were done to find differences between groups and variables, based on a set of hypotheses.
- We conducted a thematic analysis of all responses from the open-ended question and categorized our data into four major themes. These themes broadly reflected the keywords from comments made by the physicians.

Results

- 101 physicians completed the survey.
- 55 male and 46 female physicians participated (mean age of 45).

Picture 1: Medical practice location of survey respondents divided into 5 regions in the US

Graph 1: Measures recommended by PCPs to reduce barriers and promote COVID-19 vaccination

- Bangladesh descent comprised the largest group (83%), followed by physicians of Indian (8%) and Pakistani origin (4%).
- Most physicians (48%) who responded resided in the North-East region.
- Internal medicine specialty was the largest group, 76% while 11% physicians belonged to family medicine.
- Among these physicians, 42.5% worked in private practice and 47.5% in health systems.
- 93% respondents were actively involved in advocating for COVID-19 vaccination.
- A significant number of physicians were familiar with vaccine hesitancy (79%), however, only 64% have been successful at persuading the unvaccinated patients.
- There was no significant differences between male and female physicians’ competence and other key comparative groups; practice setting, duration of experience, in vaccination related care.
- The leadership team was directly involved in promoting vaccination efforts in only 47% of the healthcare practices.

Conclusion

- We learnt about interesting perspectives of how the primary care workforce of South Asian background is handling COVID-19 vaccination related care and vaccine hesitancy in clinical practice.
- Our study showed that most PCPs had a good understanding of vaccination related care and strongly believed in vaccine advocacy.
- The participants were mostly Bangladeshi physicians and did not represent other dominant South Asian subgroups such as Indian and Pakistani physicians.
- Several physicians suggested partnering with public health entities and having increased access to vaccines at their practice sites. Some PCPs believed having COVID-19 vaccines offered at their location would result in better reception of vaccination by patients.
- Our study respondents also highlighted that a strong leadership support may be necessary to advance COVID-19 vaccination through primary care physicians.

Next Steps

- The findings of our study could be viewed as a pilot and may encourage a larger research on physicians of South Asian descent to better understand how they could be more involved in COVID-19 vaccination campaigns.
- The policymakers and researchers may consider focus groups to learn about vaccine hesitancy management and better understand challenges faced by PCPs of South Asian descent as they promote COVID-19 vaccination.