Vaccine Hesitancy: Lessons from Connecticut Veterinarians

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND

• Vaccine hesitancy is one of the top ten threats to global health according to the WHO.1
• Increasing vaccine skepticism in human health seems to be mirrored by similar trends in animal health. 2, 3
• The popular press has reported declining vaccination rates in cats and dogs in the US4, UK5, and Australia6 but little scientific literature exists.
• Veterinary under-vaccination presents risks for animals as well as humans through zoonotic infections.
• Vaccination “exemptions” among Connecticut children increased in 2018-20197, even as neighboring New York experienced three measles outbreaks during that period.8

OBJECTIVES

1. To quantify prevalence and trajectory of veterinarian-reported vaccination hesitancy in pet owners.
2. To assess knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding vaccination hesitancy among Connecticut veterinarians.
3. To ascertain barriers and enablers of vaccination to communication styles and message content likely to engage pet owners.

METHODS:

• A brief vaccine hesitancy survey adapted from WHO materials was deployed via email and postal service to 121 veterinary practices representing 243 licensed veterinarians in Fairfield County.
• 15-item survey assessed three domains: veterinarians’ beliefs, vaccination-related behaviors, and experience with vaccine-hesitant pet owners.
• Simple descriptive analyses were performed to characterize study responses.
• Pearson Chi-Square tests (and Fisher’s exact tests) were used to assess associations among variables.

RESULTS

• Survey response rate was 47%.
• 63% of veterinarians reported vaccination hesitancy has increased over recent years.
• 94% of veterinarians have encountered vaccine hesitancy.
• 77% of veterinarians encounter vaccine hesitancy monthly or more often.
• 59% of veterinarians’ opinion of the importance of animal undervaccination is determined by their opinion of the importance of human under-vaccination.

WHAT THIS STUDY ADDS

• Augments sparse scientific literature about veterinarian vaccine hesitancy in companion animal owners.
• Informs future efforts for synergistic public health vaccine communications and risk management interventions.
• Suggests there is opportunity to leverage the confidence and expertise of veterinary providers in the COVID-19 era to advocate for vaccine catch-up and vaccination adoption against zoonotic illness.

REFERENCES

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