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'Canadians can be coaxed into a COVID-immune herd'

By Jim Meek

Herding Canadians into a COVID-19 safe space might prove easier than assembling the neighbourhood cats for a holiday singsong, but it's still no simple task.

Christine Lackner gets this.

The psychology professor at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax knows Canadians have often been laggards when it comes to taking vaccines.

As Lackner and her co-author Charles Wang say in a recently released pre-print research paper, "Canada has failed to meet its goal of 95% vaccine coverage in accordance with the World Health Organization and ranks 28th out of 29 affluent countries for vaccine coverage rates."

Lackner and Wang also note that only 30.8 per cent of healthy Canadians between the ages of 18 and 64 were vaccinated against influenza in the winter of 2018-19.

At least twice as many Canadians, an estimated 70 per cent of us, would have to take a COVID-19 vaccination in Canada to achieve herd immunity and beat back the virus.

None of this is to say that Lackner takes a gloomy view of Canada's effort to achieve herd-immunity status, as the first 250,000 vials of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccines are being distributed across the country.

Quite the contrary.

Lackner has been working for the past year or so to understand what might persuade vaccine-hesitant Canadians – particularly parents and children - to queue up for a vaccine.

Given that children under 18 represent almost 20 per cent of the population, a good proportion of our kids will have to get pricked in the arm with a needle to help make Canada's vaccine program a success. (It is widely expected a COVID vaccine for children will be approved in 2021.)

Lackner's research, focussing on family and parental attitudes to vaccination, is summarized in the "pre-print" research paper, *Demographic and psychological correlates of SARS-CoV-2 vaccination intentions in a sample of Canadian families*.

In the arcane world of academic publishing, pre-print means the research has yet to be peer reviewed. But the research findings are too significant to ignore. After surveying 455 parents, with 857 children in their charge, Lackner found that, on a sliding scale from 1 (never) to 100 (definitely), the mean score of parents' intentions of having their child vaccinated was 76. The average Canadian parent is leaning towards getting their child vaccinated, but is not completely sure.

Lackner's findings don't align with national polls showing about 60 per cent of Canadians would definitely or likely be vaccinated against COVID-19. She explains this by saying her survey didn't ask respondents a simple yes-no question with regard to whether they would get a vaccine.

Instead, they were asked a more nuanced question – to rank the likelihood they would be vaccinated on a scale of one to 100. On average, they say they were 76% per cent certain they would get their child(ren) vaccinated, though there was a lot of variation around that number. “Some people say they would never agree to vaccination, period.”

According to the survey results, older parents and better educated parents were more likely to be pro-vaccination along with those who trusted the medical system or who were experiencing stress over COVID-19.

Lackner feels it is crucial to understand the views of parents who are hesitant about getting themselves or their children vaccinated. “They have the best interests of their children and their families at heart... And we have to remember that COVID-19 is so different from anything we have ever experienced in the past.”

The Mount Saint Vincent professor believes any public awareness campaign should respect the views of the vaccine hesitant. “Looking down on segments of society that are hesitant is not helpful. We should focus on providing good information to people who are most hesitant, and we should do so sensitively.”

A toll-free telephone line, staffed by people who understand the issues, could foster greater public support for vaccination. A public advocacy campaign might focus, as well, on the risks of not taking the vaccine.

At the very least, Lackner's research gives Canadians hope that we can put the COVID nightmare in our rear-view mirror: We now know a majority of Canadian parents are inclined to do their part to help the nation achieve herd immunity by the time the holidays roll around in December 2021.

Hopefully, by then, you'll be able to enjoy Christmas dinner with anyone and everyone of your choosing, even if no chorus of cats is singing Jingle Bells in the backyard.

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