



## Senior Immunization Awards CASE STUDY

### Southern Illinois University-Quincy Family Medicine Residency

### THREE STEPS FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK TO IMMUNIZATION SUCCESS

Dr. Priyanka Costa would be the first to admit that the opportunity to apply for a 2014-2015 Senior Immunization grant from the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Foundation came at just the right time. The second year resident in Family Medicine at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine-Quincy (SIU-QFM) “had been thinking about a project like this, but hadn’t acted on it yet.” The endorsement of faculty was all it took to get the ball rolling.

The project was certainly needed at the SIU Healthcare clinic. The center had yet to develop a system for consistently educating or vaccinating the public generally--or seniors in particular--about the importance of immunizing for flu and pneumonia. There was plenty of room for improvement in vaccination rates, especially among the vulnerable 65+ population.

Efforts began right away to inform personnel about immunization project goals and objectives through staff meetings, “top of the morning” nursing meetings, and noon time resident meetings. These gatherings also offered an opportunity to emphasize the implications of these illnesses. In total, the SIU-QFM project team included three Family Medicine residents, two faculty members, a project coordinator, a nurse administrator, one lab assistant, and a representative from information technology (IT).

Putting the grant action plan in place, however, proved challenging. Just as everyone was up to speed and “on the same page” regarding grant activities, the project hit a major snag. Delivery of essential vaccines (both influenza and pneumococcal) was delayed for several months, with supplies being distributed first to major providers such as pharmacies. Consequently, the second component--sending letters and information brochures to all active senior patients--had to be postponed for several months. “This really stalled our momentum,” recalled Dr. Costa, “but we couldn’t do anything about it.”

A supply of vaccine was eventually delivered, and the delayed mailing went out in November 2014. In addition to patient education flyers explaining the importance of immunization, the letter encouraged recipients to come in for vaccinations at their convenience during expanded walk-in clinic hours. The letters also reminded seniors to schedule their annual Medicare wellness visits, and many did. “Our reception desk was bombarded with phone calls to schedule wellness exams in the first weeks after the letters went out” said Dr. Costa, and the reception team stepped up to the challenge. Follow-up reminder calls made by nursing staff also allowed them to update the patients’ vaccination records and to educate further. Finally, for those still shown as “unvaccinated” in the electronic medical record

system, the clinic used SIU's automated telephone system to make reminder calls.

These communication strategies paid off, and vaccination rates soared! As patients came in for their wellness or other scheduled exams, nursing staff used a bright yellow Rooming Vital Sheet revised to document whether the patient was up-to-date with flu and pneumonia vaccinations and to notify the physician when either vaccination was needed. The visit also became another opportunity to stress the vaccine's importance, especially to individuals over the age of 65.

Ironically, this early success caused vaccination supply woes to resurface when initial stocks ran out. Working through their frustration, staff quickly developed a waiting list for patients, with clinic staff informing them once the vaccines became available.

The challenges didn't end with vaccine supplies, however. The clinic's primary source for immunization data (the Illinois Comprehensive Automated Immunization Registry Exchange, or I-CARE) failed to interface with SIU-QFM's electronic health record system (called Allscripts), making it difficult to generate accurate reports. Staff spent countless hours reviewing vaccination data and manually correcting the records in Allscripts – an exhausting and costly endeavor, especially since the current I-CARE system is one-directional and inconsistently updated. Ongoing efforts to improve the accuracy of its own vaccination records, combined with anticipated future improvements to I-CARE make SIU-QFM staff optimistic that accurate tracking of immunizations will eventually be achieved.

In Dr. Costa's view, the project has had a significant impact on clinic providers and nursing staff, with everyone pulling together to

consistently incorporate wellness education into every patient contact. "It created better knowledge about the importance of preventive care and the vast categories of illnesses pneumococcal vaccinations can protect against. It also helped us understand the epidemiology of influenza when the vaccine is partially effective and the impact of media on patient education."

But the project's effect on patients has been nothing short of life-saving. Dr. Costa describes a memorable encounter with a patient she'd been seeing off and on. "I'd tried repeatedly over the past year to educate her about the importance of receiving influenza and pneumonia vaccinations, but she was afraid of medical interventions of all types. She was very hard-headed, never wanted to do anything offered or take anyone's advice about anything – preventive care, medications, you name it -- *anything.*"

This day, however was different, "the patient actually *initiated* a conversation about getting vaccinated, and this time really listened." Why this change of heart? "Her sister had recently died of complications resulting from pneumonia, and she was genuinely scared. That really opened her eyes; she realized the truth of what I'd been telling her and was eager to prevent this from happening to her." Dr. Costa took advantage of the patient's new found receptivity to discuss another touchy, long-avoided topic: how to stop smoking.

With everyone pulling together the SIU-QFM staff was able to realize remarkable increases in vaccinated seniors over previous years. Success may take some time, persistence and proper tending – but with two steps forward for every one step back, there's still steady progress. "This," says Dr. Costa, "gives me hope."