

Myth Dispelled

[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The flu vaccine cannot
give you the flu, I tell him.
It's dead virus, there's
nothing alive about it.
It can't make you sick.
That's a myth.
But if we bury it in
the grassy knoll
of your shoulder,
an inch under the stratum
corneum, as sanctioned by
your signature,
in a white-coated ceremony
presided over by
my medical assistant,
and then mark the grave
with a temporary
non-stick headstone,
the trivalent spirit
of that vaccine
has a 70 to 90 percent
chance of warding off
the Evil One,
and that's the God's
honest truth.

[Tracey Hodges] Hello, I'm Tracey Hodges, and I'm talking today with Dr. Adam Possner. Dr. Adam Possner is an assistant professor, general internal medicine, at George Washington University. You just heard Dr. Possner read his poem "Myth Dispelled," which appears in CDC's journal, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. Welcome Dr. Possner. That was a very interesting poem. Thank you for sharing it with us.

[Adam Possner] Well Tracey, thank you very much. I really appreciate the opportunity to chat with you.

[Tracey Hodges] Dr. Possner, what made you decide to write a poem about the flu vaccine?

[Adam Possner] Well you know, preventive care is really important to me and I spend a lot of time with my patients talking about vaccines and labs and screening procedures, and I've really been struck by just how many patients think the flu vaccine can give them the flu. At the same time, when you think about it, it's sort of crazy that we can inject something dead into someone's arm and prevent them from getting sick. So there's the myth that the vaccine can make you sick

and there's the myth that, at least in some people's eyes, the vaccine can actually protect you and so I wanted to write a poem to play humorously off of those interpretations of myths.

[Tracey Hodges] Why is it that there are still people who think that they can get the flu from the flu vaccine?

[Adam Possner] Well, you know, I think, Tracey, it's mainly for three reasons. First of all, the flu vaccine is not perfect. Some people who get the flu vaccine do wind up getting the flu. And in the poem that I wrote I actually overestimate, I think, the effectiveness of the flu vaccine. Seventy to ninety percent is a little high. This year, for instance, I think the effectiveness is about 60 percent or so. So some people are going to get the flu even though they got the flu vaccine. So I think they erroneously blame getting the flu on the shot. Secondly, there are so many upper respiratory illnesses going around this time of year that coincidentally, some people are going to get the flu vaccine and then within a day or two they're going to catch some totally unrelated virus that's going to give them flu-like symptoms and they're going to blame the vaccine for making them sick. And thirdly, some people just wait too late to get the flu vaccine and it takes two weeks, generally, for the flu vaccine to kick in and so, again, they get the shot, wind up catching the flu before the vaccine has a chance to really protect them, and they're going to blame the shot.

[Tracey Hodges] Is it a big problem that some people aren't getting their flu shots?

[Adam Possner] It really is, because, you know, traditionally, about 200,000 people in the US alone will be hospitalized for the flu, every year, and anywhere from several thousand to even tens of thousands of people will die from the flu in the US every year. Even if you don't get hospitalized from the flu or die from it, it can really knock you on your butt and you can, you know, miss several weeks of work. So, I really do encourage all of my patients, in line with CDC guidelines, all of my adult patients, to get the flu vaccine.

[Tracey Hodges] Where do you recommend people go to find accurate information of vaccines?

[Adam Possner] Well, I will say, the CDC has a great website and if you go to Google and you just search under "CDC flu vaccine" the first result in the ensuing search is going to be the CDC's website. So I think that's a great resource for patients and certainly a great resource for clinicians. I live and breathe by the adult immunization table that the CDC provides.

[Tracey Hodges] Great. Dr. Possner, have you written other poems?

[Adam Possner] I have. You know, I've been writing for a few years now and I've been fortunate enough to share my poems through several medical journals. The Journal of the American Medical Association, the journal called Blood, Neurology, the New England Journal of Medicine, and many others.

[Tracey Hodges] What is it about writing poetry that appeals to you?

[Adam Possner] Well, you know, for me, it's a way to reflect on medicine in a different way than I'm used to when I'm wearing the white coat. It's a chance to really reflect on the incredible patient stories and experiences that I feel very privileged to have as a physician and it just helps keep me connected to humanity, really.

[Tracey Hodges] Do you think it's unusual for doctors or scientists to also be poets?

[Adam Possner] You know, I don't think it's unusual. Actually, there are several journals that have space set aside for the humanities. Of course, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, but also the Journal of the American Medical Association, the New England Journal of Medicine, and many many others, so I think for a long time now there's been an appreciation among physicians for reflecting on what we do through the humanities, through poetry and writing short stories.

[Tracey Hodges] Well, thank you, Dr. Possner. I've been talking with Dr. Adam Possner about his poem, "Myth Dispelled," which appears in the April 2013 issue of CDC's journal, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. The article is available at cdc.gov/eid. Reprinted by permission.

If you'd like to comment on this podcast, send an email to eideditor@cdc.gov. I'm Tracey Hodges, for *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

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