University of Montana Creates COVID-19 Vaccination Clinics

The global coronavirus pandemic continues to grow, even as two vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna) have been developed and approved. Stepwise distribution is in full force across the United States, but what our country needs now are trained immunizers, and lots of them. Fortunately, the University of Montana Skaggs School of Pharmacy has been responding to this urgent call with Pharm. D. students, faculty and alumni who can curb the spread of COVID-19 through their important work.

In 2020, the state of Montana declared UM an official distribution and immunization site for the COVID-19 vaccine due to its excellent research facilities and unique ability to respond to the public health crisis. Along with Harvard and Oxford, UM was named one of the world’s top 10 universities helping to solve the coronavirus pandemic. Fortunately, UM’s Pharm. D. program trains students how to immunize within the first two weeks of their study, creating more certified immunizers to meet the needs of the pandemic.

Ken Chatriand, who is the clinical supervisor of the Pharm. D. students volunteering at the UM Curry Health Care Pharmacy (which functions under the Skaggs School of Pharmacy), has developed an efficient system for immunizing people as safely and quickly as possible. Students volunteer for 2 – 3 hour shifts in the immunization clinic so they can also attend classes. Together, the ever-evolving team members started immunizing people at the rate of 20 per hour, but as the clinic expanded into a larger space, this rate increased to 300 per hour while still ensuring people stay socially distanced.

Chatriand demonstrates his pride in the role pharmacists and pharmacy students are playing during this historic moment, but the amount of work left to do is substantial. When asked how he’s holding up, Chatriand compares the complicated process of population immunization to eating an elephant.

“It’s a huge task,” Chatriand said, “but we’re getting it done one bite at a time…one patient, one vaccination at a time.”

Katelyn Michell, a fourth-year Pharm. D. student interning at Curry Pharmacy as part of her 6-week community pharmacy clinical rotations, serves as the vaccination check-in coordinator. She consults her list when people arrive, confirming they have an appointment. Currently that means they’re students, faculty or staff on the 1A list, people serving in the healthcare field who are working with patients. If there’s any room to spare, Michell adds walk-ins, but they must meet the state mandated guidelines for the current phase of treatment.

“We’ve had very few no shows,” Michell said. “This is the first time I’ve seen people actually excited to get a shot.”

The clinic has been using Moderna vaccines which come 11 doses to a vial. Once a vial is opened, all of the vaccines must be used within 6 hours, so Michell helps to ensure the correct number of patients arrive at the clinic each day in order to guarantee no vaccines go to waste. On top of managing the flow, she screens people for COVID-19 before allowing them to enter the clinic, and she directs them to a socially distanced seat that’s completely sanitized between each client.

The Public Readiness and Emergency Preparedness (PREP) Act authorizes immunization certified Pharm.D. students to vaccinate for COVID-19 under the supervision of pharmacists like Chatriand. UM Pharmacy faculty have stepped up to prepare all of their students for this important work.
Clinical Assistant Professor of Pharmacy Rachael Zins says, “We teach our students to be confident in their ability to administer any kind of vaccine. That starts with understanding a patient’s disease states, known allergies, or if the patient is immunocompromised.”

Immunizing for COVID-19 is not a speedy process. Even after patients are vaccinated, they must remain in their seat for 15 – 30 minutes while being observed for any signs of adverse reactions, such as anaphylaxis. Kirsten Ganaja, a third-year Pharm. D. student volunteer, explains these could range from difficulty breathing, fainting, nausea or vomiting, or skin reactions. Ganaja hasn’t witnessed any adverse reactions yet, but she’s prepared to initiate basic life saving strategies if required because the Montana Board of Pharmacy requires BLS/CPR training as part of the immunization delivery certification process.

“I’d probably look for Ken first, just to make sure I had my supervisor’s help, but definitely, I’m ready to administer epinephrine if needed,” Ganaja said through her 3-layer disposable mask and face-shield provided by the School of Pharmacy.

Chatriand is prepared to increase the volume of vaccinations by developing a drive through immunization clinic. Patients will remain in designated parking spots for the observation period. He envisions this clinic as an opportunity to expand the University’s outreach to high risk community members, perhaps older people who might not feel safe walking into a clinic. In the meantime, he and his students have been providing services to high risk people by also going to nursing homes and assisted care facilities.

The Skaggs School of Pharmacy is also moving towards coordinating vaccination efforts in rural communities where appropriate facilities for storing the vaccine do not exist and where human resources for undertaking such a large endeavor are limited.

Director of Experiential Education and Clinical Assistant Professor Cherith Smith has started to administer the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines to Native American and Alaska Native students, faculty and staff at UM who identify as high risk. She wears many hats and has vaccinated healthcare personnel, elders and high-risk populations at the All Nations Health Center in Missoula with Pharm. D. students and faculty members assisting her.

“Students usually select the profession of pharmacy because pharmacists make a difference in patient’s lives,” said Marketa Marvanova, Dean of the Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Acting Dean of the College of Health. “During this pandemic, our students have the opportunity to provide essential preventative services and further demonstrate the impact that pharmacists can make.”

University of Montana’s Skaggs School of Pharmacy is accredited by the Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education. Our Pharm.D. students have a 93% first-time NAPLEX pass rate and close to 100% graduate employment rate. For more information, contact us at pharmacy@umontana.edu