



**Mario J. Paredes**  
Chief Executive Officer  
mparedes@somoscommunitycare.org  
646.979.7613

## **DOCTORS' DUTY IS TO CARE FOR VACCINATED AND UNVACCINATED ALIKE**

*Mario J. Paredes*

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THE OMICRON SURGE may be fading, but health-care authorities continue to stress the vital importance of getting vaccinated. As masks are coming down in schools and many workplaces, there is a strong possibility that another COVID-19 variant could suddenly pop up and pose a new threat. Meanwhile, Omicron has by no means gone out of the picture.

Some 214 million Americans have gotten vaccinated, close to 65 percent of the US population, but many millions have not yet gotten the vaccine. Confusion, fear, and outright refusal are behind the resistance. Increasingly now, doctors are refusing to treat unvaccinated patients, leaving large swaths of the population at significant risk of going without care for critical conditions.

This new trend was highlighted by Dr. L.S. Dugdale, director of Columbia University's Center for Clinical Medical Ethics. Writing in The Wall Street Journal, the bioethicist reports some stunning examples of doctors and medical institutions seeking to steer clear of unvaccinated patients. Doctors in Alabama, Florida, District of Columbia and Toronto have "dismissed unvaccinated patients from their practices, while a "Texas task force has considered reserving beds in intensive-care units solely for the unvaccinated."

Other measures might include "charging higher insurance premiums, withholding scarce medications or refusing treatment." Some ethicists insist that "it is ethical to decline to treat" the unvaccinated. After all, keeping them out of clinics "protects both healthcare workers and high-risk patients and can motivate patients to accept vaccines."

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2910 EXTERIOR STREET, 1ST FLOOR • BRONX, NY 10463 • SOMOSNYHEALTH.ORG • 1 833 SOMOSNY (1.833.766.6769)



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There is a logic to this reasoning, writes Dr. Dugdale; “throughout the pandemic, the unvaccinated have faced greater risk of severe illness, hospitalization and death. They’ve also risked harming others by inadvertently spreading the disease.” But that argument has a flip side: patients who are refused treatment by one doctor may not be able to find care elsewhere, and such patients “may not be able to fill prescriptions or manage chronic conditions.”

Many of such patients will “eventually wind up in the hospital, which can only worsen staffing and supply shortages.” Indeed, according to Dr. Dugdale, “doctors who seek to punish the unvaccinated end up punishing their own colleagues.”

That is practical argument against doctors refusing to care for unvaccinated patients. However, higher values are in play. “Denying care to the unvaccinated also violates the ethical principle of treating all patients justly, regardless of their complicity in becoming sick,” argues Dr. Dugdale, adding that “no one exercises enough, eats perfectly or takes medicines exactly as prescribed.

“We doctors don’t dismiss patients for smoking or drinking too much. Why punish them for refusing the Covid shot?”

Doctors, having sworn their medical oath, are bound to help improve the health of all patients. This duty to care characterizes the commitment of SOMOS Community Care, a one-of-a-kind network of 2,500 doctors—most of them primary care physicians—caring for close to one million of New York City’s most vulnerable Medicaid patients. This population mostly comprises people of color, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanic Americans.



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There are several hurdles for the colored poor to access the vaccine. There is a level of doubt and distrust about the safety of vaccines and a degree of difficulty in accessing the vaccine. SOMOS doctors—who play the role of family doctor of old and are trusted community leaders—are in a unique position to explain the benefits of the vaccine, helping overcome their patients’ resistance to getting vaccinated.

Already, with the vaccine dispensed at their doctor’s neighborhood practice, thanks to a mandate from the New York State Department of Health, a barrier to access for this patient population—the relative difficulty of online access to vaccination appointments at hospital settings—has been removed. SOMOS doctors also speak about the importance of vaccination at churches, schools and via webinars.

Even as they protect themselves from infection, SOMOS doctors welcome the unvaccinated without reserve. If nothing else, the pandemic has revealed the extent of their patients’ underlying health conditions—diabetes, cardiovascular disease, high blood pressure, etc.—that made them vulnerable to COVID-19. The vaccinated and the unvaccinated alike suffer from a range of chronic conditions that require urgent care.

SOMOS doctors fit the definition of a doctor’s duty laid out by Dr. Dugdale: “Medical professionals are required to be neither saints nor martyrs. But they are obligated to care. The greatest hazard we face—vaccinated or not—is to have a generation of healthcare practitioners lose sight of that purpose.”



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