

< Barbers are enlisted to tout the benefits of being vaccinated against COVID

RACHEL MARTIN, HOST:

Public health officials in Philadelphia want people to go to barbershops for a haircut, a shave - sure - but also for a healthy dose of the truth when it comes to the COVID-19 vaccine. But as WHYY's Ximena Conde reports, fighting misinformation is hard.

XIMENA CONDE, BYLINE: Javan Rankines is a barber at Essential Blends Hair Studio in Camden, N.J. He says when people in his chair bring up the COVID-19 vaccine, it's often with suspicion, which he tries to address.

JAVAN RANKINES: And a lot of times, they'll bring it up. Or it just naturally comes up in the conversation. And like, they might mention something like, oh, this guy got the vaccine. He wilding. And I tell them, like, oh, I'm vaccinated also. And we go from there.

CONDE: This summer, a local nonprofit and Rutgers University-Camden recruited Rankines and 14 other barbers to help answer questions about the vaccine at their respective shops. The White House and local health departments partnered with 1,000 other barbershops and hair salons for a similar initiative. The thinking goes, people are more likely to listen to a trusted community member, like Rankines, than a celebrity. But even Donald Smith, Rankines' co-worker, has been hard to convince.

DONALD SMITH: It will take several years for me to say, all right, these people have been vaccinated and their offspring - those kids come out perfectly fine, then I'll say, you know what? I might get vaccinated.

CONDE: Smith worries the vaccine was rolled out too quickly. He doesn't see the point of the jab if you can still get infected, though it would likely protect him from severe complications. Smith also says events such as the Tuskegee experiment, where Black men were denied proven treatment for syphilis in the name of science, show racism is baked into the medical system. Rankines' mission gets even trickier when Smith begins to cite claims that are blatantly false, myths embraced by most of the barbershop employees and many customers.

SMITH: I'm pretty sure everybody saw about how some of the shots look like they're magnetized where the injection spot is.

CONDE: This is not true. But Smith says the claim reinforces his belief that governments and pharmaceutical companies don't have his best interests in mind.

SMITH: Australia right now, they say that mysterious troops - for people that haven't been vaccinated - have come in the house and snatched their children because they choose not to get vaccinated.

CONDE: This claim has also been widely debunked. Public health advocates say dispelling vaccine myths is more important than ever as the delta variant becomes a greater concern across the United States. But they acknowledge it's delicate work.

DAVID RAPP: If someone really believes the medical community isn't - doesn't have people's best interests - heart, there could be real reasons that they hold - and their own experiences that suggest to them that's the case.

CONDE: That's David Rapp, a Northwestern psychology professor who helped write a handbook on how to improve vaccine communication and fight misinformation. Rapp says, to scoff at those embracing misinformation risks alienating them and putting them on the defensive.

RAPP: You have to meet them where they're at and then think about, what are the core issues that are making them resistant?

CONDE: And while barbers like Rankines don't gather data on who they've convinced, Rapp says this trusted messenger approach remains an effective tool. For his part, Rankines wants to do the right thing while not hurting his business.

RANKINES: Even if I can reach 1 out of 10, that's good.

CONDE: Rankines says he'll keep sharing his experience until the pandemic is under control.

For NPR News, I'm Ximena Conde in Philadelphia.

(SOUNDBITE OF CHROMONICCT'S "OCEANIA")