



Letter from the Editor Harry Colbert, Jr.

For me, the biggest side effect is peace of mind.

On June 10 I rolled up my right sleeve to receive my second dose of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine. Deciding to get vaccinated was a decision to which I didn't arrive lightly.

Several factors weighed in my decision. The two that weighed most against getting the vaccine were the history of government sanctioned medical experimentation on Black people and the shockingly swift time it took to create and approve a vaccine. For many unvaccinated Black Americans those are two of the most cited reasons for their continued (and understandable) hesitancy.

Consider the Tuskegee Experiment – a 50-year experiment on Black men who were intentionally denied available treatment for syphilis and misled to believe they were being treated – went on until 1972 and only ended after a whistleblower went to the press. Just years earlier – as early as 1953 and as late as 1965 – in my hometown of St. Louis, the government again unwittingly experimented on poor, mostly Black residents of a housing project by spraying the air with radioactive particles. The heinous experiment didn't become publicly known until 2012 thanks to the diligent research of a community college professor. So the hesitancy is understandable.

Yes, we don't know all the science behind the vaccine, but we have a pretty good picture of what COVID-19 is and can do. Six hundred thousand deaths and 3.5 million cases in the U.S. alone. For me, these aren't just numbers. I know people who lost their lives due to this insidious virus. I've had friends on the brink of death due to COVID and those with long term lung damage due to COVID pneumonia. I know COVID firsthand. Thankfully my case was "mild."

After recovering from my bout with the virus, I at first resisted the vaccine because I had the understanding that I most likely carried a certain level of immunity, but for how long and against what strains?

With three FDA approved vaccines – Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson

(the lone one-shot option) – I began to feel a bit more comfort in the vaccine and the science behind it. In May I decided to get the Moderna two-shot vaccine. I was intentional about choosing Moderna.

Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, a scientist with the National Institutes of Health's is partly responsible for the Moderna vaccine. Corbett, a Black woman, has been working on a coronavirus vaccine for the past six years (understanding that COVID-19 is just one variant of the coronavirus). While we know there were several Black faces involved with the Tuskegee Experiment, I still chose to put my faith in Corbett that her efforts are ethical and sincere. For me, there was comfort in knowing a Black woman was deeply involved in the process of coming up with a safe and effective vaccine.

But to offer the most succinct answer as to my decision to get vaccinated it is my Aunt Claramarie.

Aunt Claramarie is as much a surrogate mother as she is my aunt and when COVID-19 broke out she was left isolated in Upstate New York. While she remains in contact with her loved-ones via the telephone, we all longed for personal human interaction. Once travel restrictions eased for New York I visited Aunt Claramarie prior to being vaccinated. We were masked the entire time and not once were we able to share a simple hug. A kiss on the cheek was out of the question.

Aunt Claramarie was among the first to be vaccinated. She did it for her, but she did it for all of us. And when she asked if I had my shot(s) I said "no" and she said, "You need to be vaccinated." And then she said, "And when you get a chance it would be nice for you to visit again."

Truly, that's all it took. No, I don't know what – if any – long term side effects are in store due to the vaccine, but I do know I can't wait to see my aunt and give her a hug and kiss. If being able to be with the ones you love to most is a side effect of the vaccine, by all means, sign me up.

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