What It Means When Celebrities Stay Coy About Their Vaccine Status

Public health leaders hoped more well-known names would become role models for getting the vaccines.

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When two St. Louis Blues hockey players were sidelined because of COVID-19 just days before this year's NHL playoffs, the team said young defenseman Jake Walman had been vaccinated against the deadly illness. But it was mum about the vaccination status of a more well-known player: star forward David Perron.

It wasn't until 10 days later — and after the Colorado Avalanche buried the team, without Perron touching the ice in any of the series' four games — that he begrudgingly acknowledged he had been vaccinated.

"I don't want to talk about that anymore," Perron, the team's leading scorer, said at a press conference.

While fans often know intricate details about athletes' knee joints and concussions, COVID vaccinations are another story. Reticence is common among professional athletes. Vaccination status is also a point of secrecy among some Republican lawmakers, other public figures and even many regular people.

Public health leaders say that people in the limelight do not have an obligation to announce or answer media questions about their vaccination status, but many add that they hoped more well-known names would become role models for getting the vaccines.

Instead, they say, the politicization of the shots, misinformation and flawed public messaging from the federal government have made the vaccines controversial and something some public figures are reluctant to endorse, which then ripples across society.

President Joe Biden is trying to get at least 70% of the nation's adults vaccinated by July 4. So far, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 65% of American adults have received at least one dose.

"I continue to be hopeful that celebrities will share their vaccination status and use their platform

to encourage people to get vaccinated," said Thomas LaVeist, a sociologist and the dean of the School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine at Tulane University. "But I haven't seen a lot of celebrities really embrace that role."

LaVeist and others in public health hoped someone would step up as Elvis Presley did in 1956 to help increase the low rate of polio vaccinations. He received his shot on "The Ed Sullivan Show."

But that occurred years after the polio vaccine was developed, whereas the COVID vaccines became available less than a year after the onset of the pandemic.

"We still have not done a good enough job of explaining to people how and why it is that we were able to have a vaccine developed so quickly, and a lot of people have questions about whether corners were cut," said LaVeist, who criticized the Trump administration's decision to call its vaccine development program Operation Warp Speed.

Former President Donald Trump also hurt vaccination efforts among Republicans when he received his vaccine privately rather than in a public setting like Biden and other former presidents, said Gregory Zimet, a behavioral scientist who studies vaccination at Indiana University School of Medicine.

When CNN conducted a survey of congressional lawmakers in May, 95 of the 212 Republican House members said they had received the vaccines and 112 Republican offices did not respond at all. (All congressional Democrats said they had received the vaccines.)

"For some individuals, particularly if their social circle is very anti-vaccine or skeptical of the vaccine, it can feel very uncomfortable to come out and say, 'I got vaccinated,'" Zimet said.

Sports stars, who are often asked about their health, could change public perceptions of the vaccines, said Nancy Berlinger, a bioethicist at the Hastings Center, a research institute in Garrison, New York.

"In the worst days of HIV/AIDS, the fact that Magic Johnson was willing to talk about being HIV-positive changed public conversation in this country," Berlinger said. "Not everyone is able to step into that role."

Basketball king LeBron James, when asked if he planned to get a COVID vaccine, told reporters in March, "That's a conversation that my family and I will have. Pretty much keep that to a private thing."

Jennifer Reich, a sociologist at the University of Colorado-Denver who has studied vaccine hesitancy, thinks that James and other NBA stars could be reluctant to promote the vaccines because of the way athletes have been castigated in recent years for taking stands on hot-button issues.

But James has expressed support for the Black Lives Matter movement and called for the prosecution of police officers who shot and killed Breonna Taylor, a Black medical worker, in her

Kentucky apartment.

“It’s not like he is someone who has been a shrinking violet and has not stepped into the public arena to make very strong statements about inequities and problems in our society,” Zimet said. “So, it’s a little hypocritical that he would now say, ‘This is a private issue.’”

Not everyone in public health is convinced, though, that what James, Perron and other celebrities say is crucial to vaccination efforts.

Sandra Crouse Quinn, a professor of family science at University of Maryland, studied the role of communication in vaccine acceptance during events such as the 2009 H1N1 pandemic. She found that while public figures’ disclosures can make a difference, they are not as important as endorsements from “people we care about and people who care about us,” she said.

“If Beyoncé came out with a vaccine video, would people watch it? Yes,” Quinn said. “Is it entertainment? Yes. Does it move somebody? Not necessarily, because her life is so dramatically different” than that of an ordinary person.

But Timothy Caulfield, a law professor at the University of Alberta and the author of a book on vaccine myths, believes celebrities can make a big difference, pointing to actor Jenny McCarthy’s role in the anti-vaccine movement.

“The role that pop culture can play in normalization is a constructive role,” Caulfield said. “We are getting close to that hesitancy hurdle in jurisdictions where you are getting 60%-65% of people vaccinated, so this messaging may seem trivial, but it matters when you are talking about trying to get another 2% or 3% of the population vaccinated.”

During the time when Perron was quiet during the playoff series, sportswriters and fans speculated about his vaccination status. At the press conference where he revealed his vaccination after being questioned about it, Perron said, “I don’t know why it’s a big deal.” He pointed out that he and two other players had gotten COVID despite being vaccinated.

“It’s unfortunate and shows that it’s not perfect,” he said, adding that, among his teammates, “I can tell you that we support each individual to make their own decision.”

Even if Perron had declined a vaccine or not revealed his status, some fans would likely not have held it against him.

Thomas Welch, who hosts a hockey podcast, “Locked On Blues,” quickly decided to get vaccinated because his father and brother have Crohn’s disease, which means they could face a greater risk from the coronavirus. But Welch said he understands that for some people the vaccines might not make sense for various reasons.

“As much as we love talking about these players and breaking down the analytics of the sport, at the end of the day, each of these players are people,” said Welch, who lives in Jefferson County,

outside St. Louis. “We lose sight of that a lot.”

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