Study after study shows that patients look to their physicians for advice about vaccines. “My doctor didn’t say I needed it” is a common response from patients in surveys and studies when patients are asked why they have not received a particular vaccine.

Interestingly, in surveys and studies designed to understand the physician’s point of view, physicians usually report that they believe their patients would not have agreed to pay for the vaccine had they strongly recommended it. However, studies show that patients rank “having the means to pay” low on their list of competing factors that affect their decision to receive a vaccine that their physician strongly recommended or that they perceived they needed.

Our patients need to know how highly effective vaccines are and how extensively they have been studied. There is a misconception by our patients that vaccines are experimental, that they have not been subjected to rigorous testing, that they cause the diseases they are intended to prevent.

Our patients need to know how safe vaccines have proven to be. When my at-risk patients ask me if the H1N1 vaccine is really safe, while telling them “yes,” I remind them that there are still known H1N1-related deaths occurring at a high rate compared to no known deaths related to receipt of H1N1 vaccine.

One thing I have found that my patients appreciate the most is a fair and honest answer when they ask me if I have taken the vaccine myself and will I offer the same to my children. If I can answer “yes” with confidence, my patients tell me this provides them with additional confidence. If I cannot answer “yes” and I am eligible for that vaccine, perhaps there are concerns about that vaccine I must answer for myself before I can recommend it to my patients.

As osteopathic physicians, it is our duty and responsibility to form a strong opinion about the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC’s) recommended vaccines for our patients and to communicate those recommendations to our patients during routine office visits or during a hospitalization, which could have been avoided had the patient received a particular vaccine, such as that given to prevent pneumococcal disease.

The words “Do no harm” are a critical part of our oath as osteopathic physicians. It is our responsibility to understand the risks and benefits of vaccines so that we can properly provide our patients with the information they need for informed consent.

If we understand the safety of vaccines currently on the market as well as the fears that our patients have and are able to balance those concerns against the efficacy, we will succeed in convincing our patients about the importance of vaccination. If we do not take the time to tell our patients they need a particular vaccine, we as a medical community will not be effective in reaching target goals for vaccination in our patient population.

Bethany A. Weaver, DO, is board certified in internal medicine and infectious diseases. She is currently the medical advisor at the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office in Tampa, Fla., and has been working in the correctional medicine field since 2005. Dr. Weaver is an expert in the management of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. She can be reached at bweaver@hcso.tampa.fl.us.