

April 28, 2021, Weekly Briefing Transcript

Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, president of UT Southwestern Medical Center, and I'm pleased to welcome you to this biweekly update for the UT Southwestern community. Beginning with the topic of the pandemic and COVID-19, I'm pleased to say that in the two weeks since the last briefing, we remained more or less at a steady state in terms of the numbers of new infections with COVID-19 and the numbers of individuals requiring hospitalization, and that's broadly within the region of north Texas, as well as specifically here on the UT campus. Overall about 3% of hospital beds are occupied by patients with COVID-19 and that does contrast in a marked way with the high water mark of 27% that we saw back in January. And that's reflected in the trends on campus. For the past 10 days or so we've had fewer than 10 patients with COVID-19 hospitalized in Clements University Hospital, and in the low 20s at Parkland Hospital. Indeed last week was a bit of a milestone in that for the first time since March 20th, 2020, we did not have a patient in the ICU being cared for for COVID-19.

This is also reflected in the newest outlook by our UT Southwestern modeling group, which should be publicly posted later today. It anticipates that we will continue to see the current, relatively manageable level of both new infections and hospitalized patients for at least the next two or three weeks. There are two very important variables there that could affect the future direction of the pandemic. The first is the emergence of the variants, which have been previously reported in many other parts of the world and the country here in north Texas. We can all be very proud of the collaboration that has taken place between our clinical laboratory and the McDermott Center, which has provided sequencing of all of the positive samples first tested in our clinical laboratory, really since just before the beginning of the year. And in carrying out those analyses, it was first apparent that the so-called UK variant, also known as B.1.1.7, was present as early as the first week or two in February, but at that point really represented only 1 or 2% of the positive samples.

Well in the most recent set from just the week before last, that is now 55% of all of our positive samples. And importantly, as some of you may have seen noted in the Dallas Morning News article earlier in the week, the group here has also detected at least a couple of instances of the so-called Brazilian variant, the P.1 variant. And I would add the variants which had been previously first detected in New York and California. All of this is to say that within our region, in our community, we do have the presence of these variants, which are known to be more highly transmissible, more infectious, and that does say that even as we are seeing a relative steady state in the number of patients infected, there is a more efficient virus out there that we need to be concerned with.

I said there were two uncertainties around the future directions as we look at the latest update from the UT Southwestern modeling group. The other is the extent to which there will be continued uptake of the opportunity to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. At this juncture across the state of Texas, about half of those who are 16 years or older have had at least one dose, and just about a third, 33% are fully vaccinated. If we look at those who are 65 and older, those numbers are really notably greater with 75% of those 65 and older having received at least one dose and 61% are fully vaccinated. So that's encouraging. On the

other hand, what is being seen across the state and also with our own vaccination efforts and those efforts of other organizations here in north Texas is a clear falloff for the number of individuals signing up and receiving their vaccine.

So the degree that we see a slowing of the uptake, and there's still remains substantial numbers of the members of our community who have not yet been vaccinated, that creates the ongoing potential for new cases of COVID-19, and with these more highly transmissible variants, possibly over the weeks ahead, an uptick. All of which is to say that any who may be listening to this briefing who have not gotten vaccinated, I will again take the opportunity to encourage you strongly to protect yourself and protect those around you and help the community overall. And also for those of you who have been vaccinated, if you have friends and family who have for whatever reason up until now not taken advantage of access to vaccines, please encourage them to do so for their benefit, as well as the benefit of the collective community.

I will say, as we head towards May 1st this weekend, and with that, the transition from our phase two to phase three of operations, the campus remains a highly safe environment. Once more, in this past week, we have not seen any instance of a UT Southwestern employee who has been found to have contracted COVID-19. And certainly none... There has been no transmission on campus now for now three plus months, but for one exception. So a safe environment as those of you who will be moving either to return to campus full-time or in some flex arrangement part-time can be absolutely confident that you are going to be safe and carrying out your work here at UT Southwestern.

So with that, I'd like to turn to some updates on non-COVID related matters, and I'm going to begin with especially happy news, and that was the recognition on Monday of two of our colleagues, Dr. Meg Phillips, chair of our department of biochemistry, and Dr. Don Hilgemann, professor of physiology and internal medicine who were elected to the National Academy of Sciences. For those who may be less familiar with the National Academy of Sciences, it was actually founded more than a 150 years ago by president Abraham Lincoln for the purpose of developing a source of scientific expertise to advise governments on various issues of the day, and it continues in that important role today. On another level, it is really one of the highest honors that can be bestowed on a scientist in the United States, sometimes referred to as the hall of fame, if that's a more familiar idiom.

With the election of Dr. Phillips and Dr. Hilgemann, UT Southwestern now is home to 25 members of the National Academy of Sciences. By far more than may be found at any other institution in the state of Texas, and certainly a reflection of the outstanding caliber of the research and faculty here at UT Southwestern. So I think we can all share some vicarious both pleasure and pride in seeing Dr. Phillips and Dr. Hilgemann honored. In my last briefing, and prior to that in the town hall, I shared my perspectives on the framing for planning our budget for the next fiscal year, which I will remind you begins on September 1st, along with the rest of the state of Texas. And this week, we formally kicked off our budget process with work going on across all departments on the university.

As I've said before, and said at the budget kickoff and repeat now, our top priority is ensuring an appropriate recognition of the dedication, hard work, and accomplishments of those working at UT Southwestern. We took the very difficult decision at the end of the last fiscal year when we were planning for the current fiscal year to forgo a merit program. And as unfortunate as that was, that was necessary at the time because of the impact, the financial impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on

our institution. Well, we have accomplished a lot in the course of this year, through the ongoing commitment of the entire workforce of UT Southwestern, and we find ourselves in a improving financial circumstance with great progress across all of our activities, our research programs, and our ability to garner research support.

When I say our, I mean, our scientists and their teams. Also in our health system, which in the month of March, for example, had its busiest month ever. And that continues to be true as we get to the end of April. And with that, I am confident that we will have the ability to support a merit program for the next fiscal year. And so, as announced on Monday, we will plan a budget with a 3% merit program, as in the past. That is, if you will, the average of merit that we will look for across all departments. The merit for an individual being an assessment by a manager. But overall, we will have that 3% target.

In addition, there will be the usual opportunities as may be appropriate for a promotion and other adjustments that go through our usual HR processes. But that will be the framing, underlying goal of of our budget for FY 22. And obviously all of these will be developed in more specific detail by your department. But I'm very, very pleased that we have come to... We have come far from where we were, as we were battling the pandemic in the last half of the prior fiscal year to look forward to rewarding the great work that's going on in the campus all throughout, even in the context of having to forego the merit in the current fiscal year.

And with that, I am just going to take a moment to give a few coming attractions. Next week, we will host the president's lecture series, virtual again, of course, and that will be on Thursday, May 6th at 4:00 PM. And our speakers will be a tag team, Dr. Daniel Scott, assistant dean of simulation and student integration, and Crystal Campbell, who is director of simulation center operations. And their presentation is going to highlight all the great work going on in our simulation center with the title of the presentation, Imitating Reality: Using Simulation to Improve Patient Care.

Also upcoming is a busy May. On May 8th, we will have the in-person, albeit masked, outdoors commencement for our medical school graduates. And on May 20th, the same for our graduates within the graduate school of biomedical sciences. Both of those of course represent major milestones in the lives of each of our graduates and their family, but also for us as an institution, really, in a way, reminding us the very roots of our institution in being charged with ensuring well-prepared physicians, as well as scientists who will advance biomedical science and improve care in the long-term. And with that, I'm going to conclude my update and turn to Jenny Doren, who will pose the questions that you have forwarded since our last briefing.

Jenny Doren:

Well good morning, Dr. Podolsky, the most frequently asked question for this briefing was about merit. So I'm very appreciative and glad that you addressed that in the 3% target as well as the potential for promotion. So I'm going to skip ahead. As you mentioned, May is just days away and we're continuing to receive questions about the transition to phase three operations. Do employees who wish to remain remote need to live within a certain distance from UT Southwestern, or can they work while out of state?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, UT Southwestern does not have a specific mile radius requirement in its telecommuting policy, but many departments, depending on the nature of the work being done by employees in that area, may have a requirement based on the need to be able to respond to emergency situations or to report to campus in situations where access to systems or connectivity would be an issue. There are however restrictions for working outside the state of Texas as a state institution, and any exceptions to that must be approved by human resources and payroll. And for those who have questions as to whether that is a possibility, I encourage you to speak with your supervisor to discuss this and any other aspect of remote work.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you. A lot of people are also writing us with questions about parking. For employees who have been remote and will remain remote for at least part of the work week, can they continue paying for the reduced remote worker parking pass? And if they're returning to campus, how do you change your parking pass and what are some other options, or why are some options not available is what this individual was asking.

Dr. Podolsky:

The remote worker permit is available to classified employees designated by their manager and confirmed by human resources as level five, meaning the majority of their work is being done remotely and they are on campus 20% or less. If you have any questions about your status as a remote employee, please speak directly to your manager to confirm your eligibility. Your manager will be able to submit a request to HR to change your telework status if applicable. And that is part of the transition we will be going in May 1st in these various tiers of flex work, again, ranging from those of us who are on campus full-time to those who may remain remote full-time and then degrees in between in between. To change your existing parking permits, please visit the parking portal. I will alert you that the north campus staff garage is currently at capacity. If you wish to be placed on a wait list for that facility, I suggest that you contact parking services via email and that's as much as I can share in terms of my limits of my expertise about parking on the campus.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you. As people are planning ahead for next week, they may be aware that many building entrances, including those that are badge only access have been limited during the pandemic. Do we have any estimate as to when the reopen with increased staff and faculty expected on campus?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, first of all, we'll continue to direct personnel to specific entrances for clinical buildings to facilitate screening of individuals entering those facilities for COVID related symptoms. We assess the need for clinical facility entrance screening on an ongoing basis. For nonclinical buildings, all badge access doors should currently be accessible with a UT Southwestern ID. We believe that the experience that we've had during the pandemic in which we transitioned to a badge only ID actually is probably a practice which will serve us well in the long-term in the sense of maintaining the security and safety of our

buildings. For anybody who needs assistance with badge access, or to report a card reader issue, you should contact the university police access control division.

Jenny Doren:

I'd like to now shift to benefits and a question that has been raised throughout the pandemic. Has there been any reconsideration of allowing employees who perhaps have had some difficulty taking vacation or leave because of these unusual times to cash out accrued hours that can not be rolled over to the next fiscal year?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, as I have noted in maybe not recent, but past briefings when it comes to our benefit programs, much of that is determined by state law and is not at the discretion of the administration here on campus. So our leave programs are among those, and we have, I would say, a generous leave program with access to vacation, sick leave, holidays. And for this year, accrual of four eight hour floating holidays available for employees to use upon request and approval of their manager. The vacation cap limits are based on Texas government statute 661.152, entitlement to annual vacation leave, and certainly welcome any of you to review that Texas statute. But again, that really supersedes any prerogative we might wish for here on the campus to create the flexibility that the question addresses. To date we have not heard that this statute has been changed to allow for additional carry over cash out or the donation of vacation time because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

I did raise this question early in the pandemic, or at least the last fiscal year where the same question arose, and at that time there really was no interest in our state house in taking that up as an issue. We recommend that managers and employees review their leave balances and their plan for using vacation time or their plan for a rollover to sick leave. And I would just take this opportunity to encourage everyone to take advantage of the application time. Quite aside from having it transition or roll over into sick leave at the end of the fiscal year if it is an excess of what's permissible, I think it's important for all of our employees to take advantage of the opportunity to refresh, revitalize, and to bring that energy that can come from time off back to their work at UT Southwestern. So I would strongly encourage you to find, working of course with your manager in terms of coordinating with others in the department to find the opportunity to take advantage of vacation time.

Jenny Doren:

We appreciate that. I think you could effectively anticipate what this week's questions were, and you did a really great job addressing most of them in your opening remarks. So just one final question for this morning. Does UT Southwestern offer designated shuttles from DART stations, including the Parkland, and what policies are in place to protect employees returning to campus?

Dr. Podolsky:

So yes, we do have shuttle operations that provide services to the Parkland DART station. Our current operations are certainly formulated to ensure the safety of those traveling on the shuttles, and that means mandatory masking for all passengers and in utilizing the shuttles, one person per seat bench.

And there are more information for those who are interested regarding the safety protocols in place by DART that could be found at their website. So I encourage you to take advantage of that service.

Jenny Doren:

Well thank you very much, Dr. Podolsky. We appreciate it.

Dr. Podolsky:

Thank you, Jenny.