

Dec. 7, 2022 Briefing Transcript

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, President of UT Southwestern Medical Center, and I welcome all of you who are joining me this morning for this last campus briefing of the 2022 calendar year. And before really proceeding with an update since our last campus briefing, I think as we look back on 2022, it's once again a year of great accomplishment by the UT Southwestern community overall. And all those who are listening in, and those who may not be listening in but hopefully will be receiving some of the messages I'll share this morning, should take an enormous amount of pride in what we've done together and all those who are benefiting from the efforts of the UT Southwestern community to improve the health of the people who come here and the health of our communities both near and worldwide.

So with that, let me proceed with an update. Since last month's briefing, I had thought I would be able to end the year without beginning with COVID. And while it certainly doesn't occupy the same level of immediate urgency as it has over the past two years, I think it's still worth a minute or two to make note that we still do see the challenge of COVID amongst all of the patients we care for and amongst our community. Without question, through the fall there was a bit of respite in terms of the number of individuals who were experiencing COVID broadly, in our region, and certainly among our UT Southwestern community and patients. But of late, we've seen a bit of a rebound. Our census in Clements University Hospital – and this is reflective of what we see both at our partners on the campus and across the region – has gone from what had been for a number of weeks really single digits up to now in the range of 20.

And while that's a far cry from what we saw during the surge of Omicron earlier in the calendar year, it reminds us that COVID has not disappeared. And so I take this opportunity to again urge those who have not either gotten their vaccine or gotten the booster that can help protect you against the current subvariants of Omicron that are circulating to go ahead and do so. And while we are in a much, much better place to be carrying on with all of our efforts on the campus in a near normal state, we should still be mindful of the risk and certain circumstances and exercise a proper amount of caution. So having said that, let me move on to other matters of important developments here on the campus, and I'll begin with a very special day we had this week in which we formally broke ground for the Texas Behavioral Health Center at UT Southwestern. This will be the first state-funded psychiatric hospital to serve the needs of North Texas.

UT Southwestern has taken on the responsibility to carry out the planning, the design, oversee the construction, and ultimately the operation of this facility on behalf of the state. For those of you who are still wondering, the location for this is at the south end of our overall campus, right along Harry Hines across Medical District Drive from Zale Lipshy. You'll see already blue fencing around the site as demolition of some existing structures is proceeding with the construction of the hospital itself. The hospital will comprise 200 beds for adult populations, adult patients. And now with a really wonderfully generous gift – and that's a bit of an understatement – to the state by Children's Health, the hospital also includes nearly 100 beds to serve the needs of children and adolescent patients. So that in total, it will be nearly 300 beds that UT Southwestern will operate there.

A lot of people deserve credit for getting us to this point. I certainly have to acknowledge the support of our elected officials in Austin who appropriated the funds for the hospital, the 200 beds that are the foundation for the project overall. But here on the campus, Dr. Hicham Ibrahim and Becky McCulley, who are spearheading the programming of this facility and will proceed to oversee not just the finalization of plans but as we move on to construction and operations, those efforts as well. They're of course supported by Dr. John Warner, our EVP for Health System Affairs and CEO of our Health System. And I also want to take special note of Mr. Juan Guerra, our Vice President for Facilities, who once again takes responsibility for this major investment as he has in other major projects over the last several years, including the very recently completed O'Donnell Biomedical Research Building and Cancer Care Outpatient Building.

And so we appreciate Juan's great leadership in executing our ambitious plans. And finally, Angelica Marin Hill, our Vice President for Government Relations, who's worked closely with policymakers in Austin as well as community groups here in Dallas and North Texas as we drove to get the consensus, which made all of this now possible. So we anticipate this will go a long way, maybe not in its entirety, but a long way to addressing the really huge need for access to behavioral health services, particularly for those suffering from serious mental illness requiring hospitalization. And of course, I will be keeping you informed of our progress up to and when we open the adult facility in 2025 and the pediatric component in 2026. So a great event on the campus this week. Coming up on Sunday, that is Dec. 11, another special day in which we will see the 2022 commencement for our School of Health Professions.

For those who may be less familiar with this, as one of our four schools now that comprise UT Southwestern's educational programs, the school supports degrees in five disciplines: physical therapy, clinical science, clinical nutrition, physician assistant studies, and prosthetics and orthotics. I might add that there will be a sixth program, which will be launched this next year, that is a program for clinical genetics, medical genetics. Very pleased to make note that the speaker at the commencement exercise on Sunday will be Dr. Shawna Nesbitt, recently appointed, as I shared in the last briefing, as our inaugural Vice President and Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer. Look forward to hearing Dr. Nesbitt's address. And I do give special credit to this class who had pursued their degrees in the midst of a pandemic, which clearly challenged them. And I have no doubt that they will bring to their professions and the ultimate benefits that they provide to patients the kind of resilience and adaptability that was necessary for them to get to this great moment in their lives. I've mentioned before that we're undertaking an update of our Six-Year Strategic Plan for the whole campus. We do this every other year.

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Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

It's a chance to step back and really calibrate our priorities and our ability to ultimately establish the most important challenges for us to focus on and where we should be focusing our resources.

This year's strategic planning process has been led by Drs. Lora Hooper and Tommy Wang, but have involved scores of members of our faculty and our broader UT Southwestern community. That process, which began at the end of the summer, is approaching its conclusion, with each subcommittee that comprised the broad effort of the strategic planning process having now formulated their recommendations; a steering committee, which is overseeing that to be sure that we've left no gaps, and to understand how to really coordinate the various recommendations that are forthcoming for the subcommittees that are doing their work to knit together the final plan.

I do expect this to be in readiness to finalize at the end of this calendar year. That is at the end of this month. And very early in the new year I look forward to sharing that with you and hope when we do,

that everybody will take time to look at it, to see where we hope to be going and to understand, and as is the case for everybody who works at UT Southwestern, your role in getting us there.

Since our last briefing, we concluded our 2022 Values in Practice engagement survey, the VIP survey. I really am grateful for the 76% of you who completed that survey. It provides tremendously important insights into what your experiences are, what your concerns are, and based on those insights can guide us in really doing everything we can to enhance UT Southwestern as a place to work and as a community. I am pleased to say that in comparison to the last VIP survey, there was actually an increase in engagement across almost all of the items. Well, maybe that's a little bit of an overstatement, 74% to be more specific, and that we continue to show a higher level of engagement benchmarked against other like institutions, particularly academic medical centers. And in fact, that margin of improvement relative to benchmarks has increased.

Nonetheless it's clear, as we would fully expect, that there's much work to do. I think there were clear messages there about the importance that we need to place as an institution on our continuing to do everything we can to ensure we are a diverse, equitable, and inclusive institution. And also, I would say one of the messages I took from it, looking at the literally thousands of comments, is that we need to further enhance, redouble our efforts on the well-being of those who work at UT Southwestern.

Managers are tasked with looking at the results of the survey from those working in their areas. And I do want in saying that to assure you, as we said at the outset, individual responses remain anonymous, but we draw conclusions from the sum of those comments. Each manager can look at where their opportunities are to improve the environment in groups with which they work. And for those of us with broader responsibilities, to be sure that we are thinking as an institution how to help that happen across the various areas of the campus. More to follow on that.

Our next survey is planned for next June. It's certainly my hope, my expectation that work based on the most recent survey will show further progress in that engagement when we get to that survey next year.

I wanted to take this opportunity to remind those of you who have children, youngsters who will be of the right age for pre-K through second grade next year, that the Biomedical Preparatory at UT Southwestern is now accepting applications for fall 2023. I hope everybody is aware of that wonderful new school that's under the aegis of the DISD, located right next to our campus on Forest Park. It's been really gratifying to hear back from both parents who are members of our community and parents of children who are in the broader Dallas area, of what a great first year that's been for the youngsters who are going to school there. Just to say, the overall intention is that with each year as the inaugural class progresses to the next grade level, we will in the course of time, and the "we" here is of course the DISD in partnership with UT Southwestern, eventually serve children from pre-K through the eighth grade.

Additional benefits of this site include engaging after-school programming and options for early drop-off and late pickup. There is now an online process to initiate an application for those of you who are interested.

Moving to another topic, we are in the midst – but really just about at the conclusion – of our 2022 State Employee Charitable Campaign. It closes out on the ninth, this Friday. For those of you who have not as yet participated, I would encourage you to consider what may be possible for you to do to help those in the many, many organizations to which you could direct your funds. Understanding that, of course, our own community has its own challenges, but hopefully within whatever is your means to think and reach out, to help those who are helping others through the State Employee Charitable Campaign. I hope you'll take the moment to do so before it closes on this Friday. I just would remind you that your donation can be done through a payroll deduction on a monthly basis or as a one-time contribution.

And with that, I'm going to conclude by taking this opportunity to make note that this is a season of thanks. We're on the other side of Thanksgiving – Christmas, Hanukkah, and other holidays are in front of us, and a new year is just around the corner. As I wrote in my holiday letter, which should be arriving if it's not gotten there yet within the next few days to you at your home, I want to take this opportunity also to express my deep gratitude for your continued service and commitment to UT Southwestern. I thank each of you for everything you are doing during these challenging times to ensure that we remain at the forefront of our mission as that is manifested in the care we provide to our patients; and the education and training we provide for those who will be the next generation of caregivers; and scientists and for the dedication of finding a better understanding of unmet medical needs that will lead

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Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

to better treatment, cure, and even better with long-term prevention. Whatever your role is here, you should know that what you do is essential and thank you for being a part of what makes UT Southwestern so special. Let me, before turning to Jenny Doren to hear your questions, wish you all the best, both for you and your family and loved ones. With that, I'm going to turn to you, Jenny, for questions that we can address this morning.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Good morning, Dr. Podolsky. I know I speak on behalf of everyone on our campus when I say we thank you for your leadership. I'd like to begin with some security-related questions and then pivot to COVID-19, flu, and if time remains, some other topics. First, concerns about safety in our parking garages, specifically Garage C at Clements University Hospital, have been raised. Employees have shared experiences with theft and are asking if there can be increased visibility of campus security in parking garages.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I certainly appreciate the reason for the question as I follow the reports from our own police in [inaudible at 19:25] of events on a daily basis on the campus. I'm certainly aware of the challenge we have in many areas of the campus in a variety of ways, but in our parking garages I do recognize there's a reason for this concern. Let me start in answering the question by stressing that we do place the safety of those who work at UT Southwestern as a top priority and do want everybody to feel secure as they come to the campus and work here on the campus. That being said, the increase that we have seen in vehicle-related crimes like auto theft and stolen catalytic converters is a nationwide trend that we're just simply not immune to. That's not in any way to say that we should therefore just throw up our hands. It's just to provide some context.

Our University Police and Public Safety officers do patrol our parking lots and garages around the clock on foot and in vehicles in an effort to detect, and even more importantly, to deter crime. But realistically, they just can't be at all places at all times and so there is opportunity that those with bad intentions are able to take advantage of. Our University Police are aware of the crime trends and are working to actively address them through increased efforts to identify suspicious circumstances in our campus parking facilities and are also collaborating with local law enforcement agencies.

I encourage anybody who sees anything at all suspicious to report it immediately to the University Police Department to aid them in their efforts to head off any of these crimes. Also to remind you, there are the blue emergency call boxes with our direct line, and you should know or be interested to know

certainly that these are tested monthly to be sure that they're in working order. Some of you raised that there were issues with them working a few months ago, which is why I wanted to make this special point. As a reminder, finally, you can contact University Police for a safety escort to your car by calling (214) 648-8311.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

During our past several briefings, you have stressed our continued focus on campus safety, especially in the wake of tragedies elsewhere. Has there been any consideration of having University Police more closely monitor who is entering our buildings?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

I would first of all note that really since the outset of the pandemic, we have gone to more limited access by requiring badge readers at many points of access on the campuses, everybody will be aware. There's a step that's been put in place, obviously prompted by unusual circumstances, which we intend to now leave in place. I know it was a frustration when there were relatively few badge access points of entry, and we've now expanded that so hopefully for those of us who are members of the community and with our UT Southwestern badges, there's not the inconvenience of having to go search for a door as much as there were as early on.

But we continuously seek opportunities to enhance security for the entire campus community. Hospital Operations, Nursing, Guest and Patient Services, Patient Safety, and the Office of Safety and Business Continuity, together with the University Police have formed a work group to review all current security measures in the hospital environment because of what we have seen locally and nationally, and the violence, which I'm sure was in the mind of the person posing this question. I look forward to recommendations from that work group in the very near future that we can implement.

The work is in progress, but I can assure you everybody appreciates the importance of it carrying out its work in a timely fashion. Additionally, as I mentioned during my last briefing, I've asked Holly Crawford, our Executive Vice President for Business Affairs, who is leading a committee on the broader context of our six-year strategic planning process, to add safety as a priority for the update of our plan. And so when that's posted after the new year, please look for the recommendations that will guide our efforts as part of a true priority for the campus.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Thank you for that. Last week the Health System announced that it was activating its influenza alert status. Can you elaborate a bit more on what exactly this means? Does it occur every flu season? Also, any additional details you can share about what we can expect heading into the winter?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, certainly as many, if not nearly all who are listening will be aware, flu activity is elevated across the country and we are certainly no exception. The current flu hospitalization rates are actually the highest we have experienced in a decade. There's a lot of speculation as to why this may be a particularly challenging flu ... some of it's in light of years we've protected ourselves with masking through the pandemic. But irrespective, it clearly is a more active flu season than we've seen in many years. As of yesterday morning, we have 15 current inpatient flu cases at Clements University Hospital and had more than 300 flu patients so far this season, and we're far from the end of it. In all instances, this has been Flu A, and while these numbers in absolute terms are not anything like what we saw from the Omicron surge, they clearly significantly surpass what we've seen in years.

That said, it's actually our routine practice that we activate an influenza alert because we can have a strong flu season, and don't know until it's over that it may not have been as severe as it could have been. Our Infection Prevention team tracks the number of flu cases and hospitalizations locally, regionally, and nationally on a daily basis, and on that basis make a determination as to what we need to do to be able to meet the needs of our patients and our community. As detailed in a communication to the Health System last week, currently about 18%, so nearly 20% of flu tests are returning positive in Dallas County, and that percentage is expected to climb in the coming weeks. Not only is it here on the campus, but in the region Flu A is by far the dominant strain. This is, as you may hear it otherwise, referred to as the strain H3N2. But it's not the only virus that is making this a more challenging season of

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Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

respiratory illness. We've also had a rise in respiratory syncytial virus, that's the RSV virus, and about 15% of samples from those coming to be evaluated for respiratory illness are turning out to be positive for RSV. You add that and influenza, it's a significant number of patients with those identified viruses, as opposed to say, the more generic cold.

Before entering patient-care units and procedural areas, all health care providers, and that includes students and trainees here at UT Southwestern, have to have proof of their flu vaccination status. I think everybody who's listening to me should know that means a purple sticker on their employee badge. If you've not been vaccinated and have some reason why that's not possible for you, you are required to wear a mask before entering any patient-care facility.

Additionally, as part of our influenza alert status, patients and visitors will be screened for flu symptoms and educated on appropriate preventative measures. Preventing the spread of influenza is a shared responsibility, and each of us can practice the same preventative measures we've taken throughout the pandemic – staying home from work when we're sick, using appropriate hand hygiene, and masking when appropriate to minimize the spread.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Would you mind now providing an update on COVID-19 outpatient therapeutics, given some changes to the emergency use authorization by the FDA? What does this mean for our patients?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

The COVID-19 landscape does continue to evolve, so too, does the treatment approach, particularly for outpatients. Last week, the FDA announced that Lilly's COVID-19 monoclonal antibody, which goes by the more technical term, bebtelovimab is no longer medically appropriate. That means with the current subvariants, it's really no longer effective to treat high-risk patients with mild to moderate COVID-19, and so they've removed that EUA, emergency use authorization, which allowed it to be available in the absence of having gone through the full testing that normally a therapeutic drug would need to have to be approved. With that determination, there are currently no monoclonal antibodies authorized for the treatment of COVID-19, so that's clearly a change from where we were over the last year and a half, as we've had various monoclonal antibodies at this point come and go.

Here at UT Southwestern, there are two preferred outpatient treatments. For those who are eligible, the oral antiviral Paxlovid remains effective and active against the current circulating subvariants in contrast to those monoclonal antibodies. However, some patients are not able to take Paxlovid due to medical contraindications or drug interactions. For these patients, the IV antiviral drug remdesivir, which

goes back to the very early months of the pandemic, is the preferred substitute in our inpatient and outpatient setting.

Our Pharmacy team was prepared for the change last week, and our Infusion team began offering the IV remdesivir as an alternative to the monoclonal on an outpatient basis as a three-day course of treatment, as of last Friday.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

I believe we have time for one quick question. We'll post the answers to the remaining questions on our website. Are there any drive-thru vaccination sites still open on campus? If so, where?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Yes. We offer both Moderna and Pfizer COVID-19 bivalent boosters at our solar lot. That's on Forest Park – specific address, 6402 Forest Park. It's kind of across the street from the backside of the Bass Center, which is now nearly fully decanted. The Moderna vaccinations are for those 18 and older, and Pfizer is for those ages 12 and up. The current hours of operations are Monday through Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 in the afternoon. It's for both employees and patients.

You can make an appointment through MyChart. All other COVID-19 vaccine doses can be scheduled at West Campus Building 3 for patients and POB Occupational Health for employees. Additionally, UT Southwestern offers the pediatric Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine at the West Campus Building 3. I'll also take this opportunity as we wrap up this briefing to remind you that employees who still wish to receive their flu shot can do so by contacting Occupational Health.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Thank you, Dr. Podolsky. Happy holidays.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Happy holidays to you and happy new year.

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