

March 29, 2023 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 monthly campus briefing. I'd like to begin by offering my congratulations to our soon-to-be newest graduates from the UT Southwestern Medical School. A week ago Friday was Match Day, and our students each learned where they will be spending the next chapter in their journey to become physicians. It was, in fact, an outstanding year for UT Southwestern students, with them matching to many of the very best residency programs across the country, including those here at UT Southwestern. And for our part at UT Southwestern, very pleased that our residency programs have attracted not only some of our most talented students but also outstanding graduates who will be coming here from medical schools across the country. I look forward to congratulating each of you rising medical graduates personally in May, when I have the opportunity to hand you your diploma as you walk across the stage at the Meyerson Symphony.

So with that let me turn, at least just a moment, to COVID and evolving trends there. Very pleased to be able to note that we have seen truly settling of the census of COVID patients we're caring for at Clements University Hospital this week actually in the mid-to-low single digits. That's reflective of trends across the region and [inaudible] in this last week. For the first time in many, many months, fewer than 2% of beds in North Texas were occupied by patients being cared for by COVID. With these evolving trends, beginning in April, we will no longer be reporting the daily census on our Today@UTSW email. I would also note, because I'm sure this is of interest to many of you, that the Health System leadership team is reviewing our current masking policies to determine whether it makes sense to relax those beyond where we are today given these trends and look forward to sharing those recommendations when they are formulated over the next week to two weeks.

So having touched on COVID, let me turn to a matter that is certainly front of mind as we begin the process for preparing the budget for fiscal year 2024, which will begin on Sept. 1. As I've shared in past briefings, we are, in fact, facing a number of challenges in the current fiscal year as our peer institutions, both health systems and academic institutions across the country. As I think everyone will appreciate, this includes in particular the impact of inflation on our expenses. It is because of that, that we know that we need to have that much greater focus and discipline in both our performance during the current fiscal year and in planning for the next fiscal year. I am very appreciative of all those who are already part of the process of preparing for the next fiscal year, and that is still a work in progress. We are committed as a priority, notwithstanding those pressures, that our FY24 budget includes a merit program. So to the extent that I've been asked about that possibility, I assure you the details of which we'll need to emerge over the course of the next, really two to three months as we complete our budget, and I certainly will keep you apprised as that takes some final shape.

And now let me turn to another matter of great importance to us at UT Southwestern; that is the 88th session of the Texas Legislature. Indeed, a critical component of our fiscal year 2024 budget will be the funds we receive through the biennial legislative session, which support our educational and research missions. I have been able to join our Vice President for Government Affairs and Policy, Angelica Marin

Hill, in visiting with our policymakers in Austin to be sure there is understanding of our institutional priorities and to provide the very clear evidence of how UT Southwestern is able to use the funds received for the state to advance our mission for the good of Texas.

As I've shared previously, our institutional priorities include securing full funding for the research performance formula that the Legislature enacted first two years ago and made permanent in the last session. In addition to that, we are working in collaboration with the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to support their request for the additional funds needed to complete the construction of the Texas Behavioral Health Center at UT Southwestern, as well as to support the cost of ramping up to open that hospital in 2025. Beyond those bills related to appropriations, we are following a number of those which have significant potential impact for institutions of higher education in the state and more specifically in some instances, medical school. Many of these policy bills have received significant attention in the media, including those focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

As I would hope that everybody joining this briefing would be aware, as state employees we are precluded from advocating for or against a specific legislative bill. We are however poised, and we do our best to be proactive in communicating information that should inform policy, including the potential impact of a bill on our operations, on our ability to deliver on the mission for the people of Texas. We will be following all these matters closely, I assure you, and obviously we'll follow up this discussion as we see what does emerge from the legislative process there.

And with that, let me turn to some matters closer to home, and to make note, particularly to our colleagues who are working in the Health System, of an important survey that will begin very shortly. In our ongoing efforts to drive for continuous improvement in our quality and safety, I want to remind our Health System colleagues that the Culture of Safety Survey is now open. Each of you who serve in our hospital and ambulatory clinics has unique perspectives about your practice and work environment, which are essential to uncovering opportunities for how we can perform even better as a team. To help us learn, we are seeking your feedback.

Last Tuesday, March 21, an email was sent from our third-party vendor Glint with a link to the biennial Culture of Safety survey to our Health System colleagues. It takes about 10 minutes to complete and your responses are confidential. That is one of the reasons we use this third party to help us gather these important insights. The survey will remain open through Sunday, April 9. We understand that many of you may provide care at our partner institutions as well as our own hospitals and clinics. However, please note that this survey is focused solely on our University Hospital and our UT Southwestern clinics, which we have the responsibility for operating. We remain equally – not to let it go unsaid though – equally committed to the best care possible for patients, irrespective of whether we're caring for them in our own facilities or in one of our partners. You can contact the Health System Patient Safety team with any additional questions. The email for that is healthsystemsafety@utsouthwestern.edu.

Also underway through April 9, our Health System colleagues have the chance to recognize their peers across all of our sites of service, not just our University Hospital and clinics. And that is to recognize peers who exemplify excellence in patient safety through the Patient Safety Star Awards program. These awards are meant to recognize individuals who advocate for teamwork and excel at promoting health and healing by creating the optimal environment for our patients, visitors, and staff. I encourage all of you to consider submitting nominations online for the Patient Safety Star Awards. Winners will be identified in three categories: clinical staff, nonclinical staff, and providers. And we will announce these at the Health System's fifth annual Celebration of Excellence on April 21.

This brings me to remind you that we will be having our fifth annual Celebration of Excellence in the Health System on April 21. While the survey and awards that I've just touched on are only open to our

Health System colleagues, I want to underscore the fact that our annual Celebration of Excellence program is open to all UT Southwestern faculty, employees, and learners, and I would encourage you to attend. This year, it will be held on Friday, April 21, from 8:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., and our keynote speaker is Dr. Allan Frankel, Executive Principal for Vizient Safe and Reliable Healthcare, who is regarded for his expertise in high-reliability leadership and culture change.

Moving on to another coming attraction, I would like to make note that Doctors' Day is really upon us. It is an annual day in which we recognize the great work by our physicians, and this year it is taking place on Thursday; that is to say, March 30. And I take this opportunity on behalf of the entire leadership team at UT Southwestern to thank you for your dedication and service to our patients. The additional event that we can look forward to is Women's History Month, which will also take place on Thursday, March 30, from noon to 1 p.m., preceded by a reception at 11:30 a.m. This is a hybrid event, which will take place on our South Campus D1 level, that's the McDermott Lecture Hall, with livestreaming available. There will also be a live Q&A. This annual event is hosted by the Office of Diversity & Inclusion, the Office of Institutional Equity & Access, and the Women & Allies Business Resource Group. All UT Southwestern faculty, staff, students, residents, and visitors are welcome to attend. Our keynote speaker this year is Marissa Solis, Senior Vice President of Global Brand and Consumer Marketing for the NFL. Ms. Solis holds over 25 years of marketing management, communications, and sales experience both in the U.S. and in Latin American markets.

And a reminder of another important window that will be closing in a few weeks, and that is our annual season of compliance training. This really is essential, not just because we're required that everybody complete compliance training annually, but it is an opportunity for us to remind ourselves of the trust that we enjoy to do everything that we do here at UT Southwestern. And that is based on confidence that UT Southwestern is very mindful of all of the obligations it has to operate within appropriate regulations and laws. This annual compliance training must be completed by April 20. I want to thank the 10,000 or so of you who have already completed it and remind everybody else of this important responsibility that we all share, including myself.

And with that, I'm going to conclude my remarks and turn to Jenny Doren for your questions.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, good morning Dr. Podolsky, and good morning to those of you listening. I'm going to begin with our most frequently asked question this month, which I believe you anticipated based on some of your earlier remarks. For a little context, I believe it was five people who asked some variation of this question and it's whether UT Southwestern will consider a cost-of-living increase. Is that a possibility?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, certainly to begin with, I'm mindful that nobody could not be aware of the pressures that we're all feeling from the rising costs, the impact of inflation, and our, certainly eagerness to do as much as we can to help all of us, our UT Southwestern community to cope with it. Our focus, as I mentioned in discussing the evolving plans for the next fiscal year is first and foremost to assure that there is a merit program so that there is an effective opportunity for there to be an increase. Finances are such, just to be very direct, that it is not possible outside of that program or on top of that program to make across-the-board increases in response to this. As much as I wish it were otherwise, that just is not within the realm of financial possibility.

We are still very aware though of challenges in terms of market forces, and have over time and will continue to look at areas that we may be falling behind relative to other institutions, organizations, and

businesses and make adjustments as appropriate within those. But that's not to say that we will be in a position to do something across the board in addition to our planned merit program.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

So also budget-related: "Is UT Southwestern in the red and if so, how many years will it take to get back in the black?"

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, this is, as I've said now a couple of times already this morning, a very challenging year. And as of February, we are reporting a net loss of about 1%, which translates into about \$27 million at this point in time. However, we do believe that we will return to end the year in the black with a positive net income. We expect it'll be somewhere in the \$47 million, that's our current projection, which would put us somewhere about 1.5% or so in the positive. That's certainly a much better result than being in the red. Although over the long term, to generate the funds necessary to continue to keep the campus updated and to sustain our operations, we over the long term aim to achieve a margin of 3%. But still, I'm certainly optimistic and confident that we will end the year in positive territory, and that is in contrast to many, many hospitals, health systems, and academic institutions across the country.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

This next question is an extension of some of what you spoke about a few minutes ago. Also building on our conversation last month on diversity, equity, and inclusion: "What is UT Southwestern able to do at this point to attract a diverse student and trainee population as well as faculty and staff across all of our mission areas?"

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I'm happy to comment and also to clarify my comments in the context of the governor's directive, which has been widely reported. We remain steadfast in our determination to recruit, retain, and develop the absolute best in our learners, in our faculty, in our staff broadly here at UT Southwestern and in particular, are committed to being sure we have an institution there is opportunity for all. The governor's directive reminded state agencies that there are obligations that frankly go back to the Civil Rights Act, that preclude you from hiring on the basis of one characteristic or another. And that's very consistent with our commitment to merit as the basis for making the best selection, whether it's of our students, again, employees, or faculty. We, in fact, have broad efforts which will continue to be sure that that is the case. And that, to the question about students, that the students who are applying are able to see UT Southwestern as an environment where they can succeed irrespective of what community they may have originally come from in terms of race, religion, gender for sure, and really any other characteristic.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

So our next question is about masking, which I know you also mentioned during your earlier remarks. Is there anything else that you want to say regarding a potential timeline for when we may relax our policy further?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I don't have a lot more to say than I've already touched on in my initial remarks, but to reemphasize those; we are currently reviewing the data in terms of transmission, getting input from our

expert colleagues in Infectious Diseases and Infection Control, and expect to formulate a policy, whether it's to continue what we're doing, or as I expect, to relax further in some settings, our masking requirements over the next couple of weeks. As to when they would be implemented, that's a further question that I've asked our Health System leadership to consider and make recommendations. And certainly, when we have those recommendations and make a decision to proceed with them, we'll be sharing those widely with the campus

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

And for members of the Health System who are listening, we'll also continue to have updates in our weekly Health System News Roundup communication on Fridays.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Good. Thank you, Jenny.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Yes. So no surprise, we have navigated several weather events over the past few years. Most recently, the late January, early February ice storm. Has UT Southwestern ever considered a disaster PTO bank?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

While we don't have a designated bank for disaster events, we do have an emergency leave policy. For the aficionados of policies, that's EMP-258 that provides me as President, or my designee the ability to grant emergency leave without deduction in salary in specific, very, if you will, unusual circumstances, on a case-by-case basis. And we have used that in the past. And I can just make note of two instances when our area was struck by tornado in October 2021, a number of colleagues lost their homes during that devastating weather event. And months later, a historic winter storm also created unlivable conditions due to a combination for some at home of burst pipes, lack of water, and major power outages. And in those instances, I was very glad to approve the award of a PTO without it being at the expense, so to speak, of what had been banked by those employees. So we'll continue to make those judgments as, I hope, rare instances, insofar as not wanting to see our UT Southwestern community impacted by that kind of event at any time soon.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Appreciate that. I believe we have time for two more questions. This first one is a two-part question: "Is there any plan for adding chargers for electric vehicles in the future? And has UT Southwestern considered converting campus shuttles to all-electric?"

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So yes, on the first. We are planning to add charging stations for electric vehicles on campus. And I would also say we are in the final stages of a contracting process to implement an electric vehicle pilot program. The pilot will bring four charging stations to North Campus Garage, one located under the NA and NH buildings, and certainly we will be communicating when those are live.

Regarding shuttles, we have considered electric ones in the past but found them to be cost-prohibitive as compared to nonelectric vehicles. As we move forward, we are going to continue to look at alternative fuel sources as part of our fleet modernization plan and have utilized compressed natural gas buses in the past. Let me add that, as I've mentioned, I believe in my last briefing, we have formed a

new workgroup to provide an updated environmental assessment of our campus, both to understand where we have an opportunity as responsible stewards to reduce our carbon footprint and otherwise any other environmental impact of our campus operations; and at the same time, to identify areas where we can enhance the resilience of our campus to be able to withstand things such as the extreme weather events, which have now seemed to be an annual occurrence these last few years.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

I know we look forward to the recommendations from that workgroup. Finally: "What more is being done to improve access to our primary care physicians and reduce the time it takes for employees and their families to get an appointment?"

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

I do understand that this is a challenge as more and more of our UT Southwestern community and certainly patients more broadly through the region, are turning to us with the privilege of providing care to them. And so we are making significant investments in growing our provider workforce across both primary and specialty care. These offices could be seen at our new locations such as the UT Southwestern Medical Center at RedBird, our Frisco Primary Care, a new practice that opened to serve the northern region, and a new primary care center, which will open in Coppell next month.

Our primary care leaders are working to accomplish a few main priorities. One is helping employees establish care quickly, and two, getting in to see their primary care physician if they have an acute issue without having to wait to visit urgent care. This is a work in progress, but when we're prioritizing with our growing team of primary care providers and advanced practice providers on campus and at our regional centers.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, thank you, Dr. Podolsky. I hope you have a wonderful day and week.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Thank you, Jenny. And same to you and the rest of the campus.