

November 3, 2021, Weekly Briefing Transcript

Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, President of the UT Southwestern Medical Center. And I welcome those of you who are joining me for this 49th briefing for the UT Southwestern community. As in past briefings, I'll begin with where we are in the course of the pandemic, both on our campus and then within the region. And I'm glad to say the news there is encouraging. We continue to see declines in the number of patients we're caring for, both at Clements University Hospital and at Parkland. Indeed at Clements as of yesterday afternoon, we were in single digits really for the first time in now months. And at Parkland, the census was in the high 30s, but that's well off the peak in this most recent surge.

Along with those encouraging trends, I'm also pleased to say that we have not found any on campus transmission now for several weeks. And this, it does mirror the generally positive trends we're seeing across Dallas and Tarrant County, and indeed the whole North Texas region. Early this morning I had the opportunity to see the most recent update from our multidisciplinary modeling group, which is now being done on a weekly basis. I'll say that, that update will be posted by the end of the day for all of you to see for yourself. But having seen it, I can assure you that the positive trends that we've seen over the last weeks are anticipated to continue out through the end of the year and into the New Year with continuing declines in transmission of COVID-19. And in certainly the number of individuals requiring hospitalization.

Of course, all of this is reflection of the impact of vaccines. And also, I think we have to assume the impact of the increase in mask wearing since the latest surge began to take hold here in North Texas, and these measures will continue to serve us well into the future. So for those of you who, for whatever reason, have not yet chosen to receive the vaccine, I hope you'll nonetheless consider taking that step to protect both yourself and the community so that we can truly see the continuing fade of this pandemic from our community.

I'm sure many listening will be aware of the important news from yesterday that the CDC Advisory Panel has recommended to the Director that access to vaccines now be expanded down to youngsters in the five to 11 age group. We anticipate that the Director will approve that recommendation, if not today, very soon, with availability for that five to 11 year age group following within days. Now, I've received questions in anticipation of this update about the possibility of access to vaccines for children of our employees. And I'll come back to address that when we get to your questions after finishing this update.

Indeed with that, I'm going to turn to matters other than COVID-19. And there are a number that I'm pleased to share with you. On Monday, we welcome a new chair of our Department of Ophthalmology. So I'm taking this opportunity to welcome [Dr. Bill Harbour 00:03:37], who joins us for the Bascom Palmer Eye Institute in Miami. Dr. Harbour is really a world's authority on tumors of the eye, and we know will bring great new leadership to our Department of Ophthalmology. Staying within the general academic realm, many of you will have noticed fencing that's been up on our East campus in the land adjacent to the Bio Center, which had been a service parking area. That fencing is for the site, which is being prepared for construction of a biomedical, engineering and sciences building that we are

developing jointly with our colleagues at UT Dallas. And in just 10 or so days, we'll mark a milestone in that project with the official groundbreaking for construction of that building.

We're excited that this will mark a new chapter in the scope of the research that is pursued here at the UT Southwestern Campus, to really bring new and innovative solutions to unmet medical needs. And as I mentioned before, our efforts will be led by our new department chair, Dr. Samuel Achilefu, who will actually be here to participate in the groundbreaking ceremony. And I'm pleased to say that since I mentioned that Dr. Achilefu will become our new chair in just the past week, he has been elected to the National Academy of Medicine, joining his many other colleagues on the campus who have achieved that significant distinction.

In my last briefing, I also mentioned that we were well underway in SECC, which is the State Employees Charitable Campaign. I know this has been a challenging time for many on our own campus, but I think we all can be aware that there are many broadly in our community in great need. Whether from the impact of COVID-19 or for other circumstances. We have now reached half of our campus goal for the campaign under the leadership of Dr. Helen Yin and [Dr. Mark Neve 00:06:01]. And I hope those of you who have not yet contributed, would consider making even a small contribution to an organization of your choosing, all of whom have been vetted for the good work that they have been doing. And those organizations that are under the umbrella of this campaign range from those focusing on food insecurity, certainly something timely as we head into the holiday season, to those supporting social arts and educational institutions.

As some will be aware, but I want to call to your attention if you're not. Monday, two days ago, began UT Southwestern's Annual Compliance Week, and there's a number of scheduled events this week, including games and prizes that provide education on the importance of compliance and how we really turn our commitment to acting as a ethical institution every way. How we turn that into action. There are also surveys that we ask you to participate in. It's confidential. Takes only five to 10 minutes, but it helps us really better understand where we should be putting our reference to reinforce our commitment to compliance and ethical operations.

Tomorrow, November 11th, we're going to celebrate an important annual event for recognizing our veterans. Established in 1996, November marks the Veteran and Military Families Month, which was designated to recognize and honor the sacrifice and work of our country's veterans and their family. And I'm very proud that UT Southwestern is home to more than 800 veterans and 100 active duty military members. And they are vital contributors to advancing the UT Southwestern mission. We want to honor and recognize our veteran employees and their families through our 7th annual tribute to veteran signature event, which will be hosted by the Office of Institutional Equity and Access and the Division of Diversity and Inclusion, as well as our Veterans Business Resource Group.

The celebration will be online this year, and it will be on Thursday, November 11th, from 12:00 to 1:00 PM. Our keynote speaker will be Retired Col. Matt Weinshel. A 26 year army veteran with 15 combat tours in Afghanistan and Iraq. The event will also feature presentation of the colors and the United States Armed Forces medley. I know from participating in each of the past years, it is always a very moving event. And I hope each of you will make time to attend it virtually this year.

Finally, I want to make special mention and draw your attention to the launch of the new medical district, Pre-K to 8 Biomedical School, which is a joint endeavor with the Dallas ISD. It will open its doors next fall to grade levels pre-kindergarten and through first grade. This past week, the DISD announced the appointment of its new principal, Dr. Roberto Gonzalez, who was raised in Columbia and graduated from the Universidad de Cartagena as a medical doctor. He has served as a principal elsewhere in the DISD since 2006.

Starting earlier this week as mentioned in today at UTSW, children of UT Southwestern employees and learners are eligible to apply for a spot in the school as our all parents throughout the DISD. The application can be found on the DISD's webpage, and is open through January 22nd. And with that, I'm going to conclude this update and turn to Jenny Doren, who once again, will pose the questions that you have forwarded since our last update. Jenny.

Jenny Doren:

Good morning Dr. Podolsky. With so many parents, myself included, standing by to vaccinate their five to 11 year olds against COVID-19, will UT Southwestern offer the vaccine of children of employees?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, we certainly know that many are eager to offer their children the added protection that comes with the vaccination. And we've been working to coordinate with our partners at children's health. And they've agreed to not only vaccinate their patients and the children of their employees, but also to make that available to the children of UT Southwestern employees as well. Details are still being solidified. And you can look for those to be shared on today at UTSW and through other communications in the days ahead.

In addition, we are planning to provide at least two days of access at UT Southwestern for the children of employees of UT Southwestern whose parents would prefer to come to one of our own facilities. These are likely to be held on weekends, so as not to interfere with school days. Again, details of those plans will be shared in the days ahead. We do expect that most vaccinations... That most children will be vaccinated by organizations that primarily serve a younger patient population like pediatrician's offices, as well as our partner children's health, as I've already mentioned. And as I've said in my initial update, there is still one final step, but we expect that will be forthcoming today, or if not today, certainly in the next days. And that is the official endorsement by the Director of the CDC, Dr. Walensky.

Jenny Doren:

Watching that closely. A few related questions. Why has it taken so long to gain approval to vaccinate this younger age group? Should we be concerned about safety? And when can we expect approval for newborns through four years old?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, the primary reason that the approval has taken longer is because the clinical trials in these younger age groups were started really substantially later than those in adults or older adolescents. So therefore, of course, they were not completed until well after those initial groups, those studies in those

adult and older children age groups. In addition, the dose being studied in the younger children is lower compared to that in adults or older children, 10 micrograms versus 30 micrograms, so really one third. So the data from the prior studies using those higher doses really could not be extended to infer how effective the pediatric dose would be.

However, the clinical trial evidence from a study of more than 3,000 children, ages five to 11, has demonstrated greater than 90% efficacy at protecting against COVID-19 disease and had a safety profile very similar to that in older children. Overall, the FDA Advisory Panel, which preceded the CDC Panel this week, determined that the efficacy and the safety of the vaccine in children clearly outweighed the risks and that panel voted unanimously 17 to zero for its authorization. Trials in the youngest age group, those below five are ongoing, and we expect to have that data by the end of this year or early 2022.

Jenny Doren:

Got it. Thank you. Dr. Podolsky, during your last briefing, you announced that meetings greater than 10 people could resume and we received a few follow up questions. First, are we still required to social distance, wear mask, avoid food and drinks? If you could elaborate on any possible restrictions.

Dr. Podolsky:

Yeah. I appreciate the question as an opportunity to make note again, that there are no longer any limits on the size of meetings. However, we continue to encourage the use of mask and were practical, to also practice safe distancing as much as that is possible. Food and drink are certainly allowed at outside meetings, but we discourage eating and drinking during indoor meetings for the obvious additional opportunity that creates for transmission, should someone unknowingly have COVID-19.

Jenny Doren:

So our understanding is that campus visitation has returned to pre-pandemic. Does this include guest seminar speakers, lecturers?

Dr. Podolsky:

Yes. We leave it to our departmental leaders to determine the need to host guest speakers in person, or in some instances, perhaps still to take advantage of the convenience of virtual platforms. But it is certainly permissible from the standpoint of campus policy.

Jenny Doren:

A lot of discussion around holiday parties. Depending on the weather, can a department hold a holiday party outside?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, this was a difficult call. Especially as we are seeing encouraging trends. But on balance, we still have taken the position that with the pandemic not gone, that we should forego holiday parties in whatever format for this season. As I mentioned at the last briefing, I myself will greatly miss the

opportunity that parties at this time of year provide to connect with our campus community and really strengthening the cultural bonds which have been so important to UT Southwestern and its ability to advance its mission. But as I say on balance, we're asking ourselves to maintain this extra level of vigilance through this holiday season.

Jenny Doren:

Since we do not appear to be rolling back through phases and let's hope our progress continues, when will we return to being able to enter the buildings without badges?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, first of all, let me remind you that pandemic or no pandemic, it's UT Southwestern policy that employees should be wearing their identification badges while on campus. And now to the question of the need to use those badges to access facilities. And I have mentioned previously and will do so again today, that we will remain on controlled access as a practice, which we come to see really helps the security of our campus and the people who work there.

Now, I am aware that there has been some inconvenience in so far as we've had a somewhat limited number of badge readers and therefore points of access. And I'm glad to tell you that we will be soon adding 16 card readers to South campus, where this has been, to the best of our knowledge, where there has been most concern. That we'll be adding 16 card readers to South campus perimeter doors so that at least there's greater convenience in the points of entry to the campus. But again, as was true in our operational decisions through the pandemic with respect to COVID-19, so it's true in this instance that we're prioritizing the safety of the campus overall.

Jenny Doren:

Our final question for this briefing is traffic related, and it's a specific one. Can anything be done about the timing of the traffic signal at Record Crossing in Southwestern Medical Avenue? Many of the lights on campus seem to turn red very quickly, and that can be both frustrating and a safety concern.

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I certainly know the issue having experienced it myself. But I do have to note that UT Southwestern does not control the timing of these traffic signals. These are typically coordinated with the City of Dallas and they have ultimate responsibility and authority for adjusting the timing of traffic signals. We usually try to work with them and we've contracted an engineer to conduct a traffic study and produce an analysis to support our request for changes. Additionally, the University Police assist by increasing their vigilance to address the safety concerns at that particular intersection, and of course, throughout the campus. But do appreciate the question and with that in mind, continue to try to work with the City of Dallas to optimize the timing of our traffic signals that are in the midst of our campus.

Jenny Doren:

Well, thank you. I hope you have a wonderful day.

Dr. Podolsky:

Thank you.