

March 17, 2021, Weekly Briefing Transcript

Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, president of UT Southwestern Medical Center. And I welcome those of you joining this morning to this bi-weekly update for the UT Southwestern community.

I am pleased to be able to say that in the time since our last briefing, we've continued to see encouraging trends with respect to falling numbers of new infections of COVID-19 and, and fewer patients in the hospital for COVID-19. Indeed on our own campus as of yesterday, we had 14 patients we were caring for at Clements University Hospital, and 24 patients that we were caring for at Parkland. I think those of you who will recall where we were back in January will see that this has been quite a remarkable decline. And that's really mirrored in what's going on around us as the positivity rates for those being tested has fallen in Dallas County to just under 10%, and about 7% in Tarrant County. All of which is of course welcome news.

And I think we continue to see some further decline as I have had the opportunity this morning to review the latest update from our UT Southwestern modeling group. And it projects in the coming two weeks that there will be further declines in the numbers of new infections and patients requiring hospitalization.

However, there is a slight cloud on that rosy picture in that the rate of decline has slowed, and maybe even really a flattened. And it's in the context of some really notable changes in some of the behaviors of those of us in the North Texas region. Specifically mask wearing as self-reported and as reported in terms of what people are seeing when they go out has fallen sharply in the last 10 days or so, really to levels below that seen anytime since that was being begun to be tracked on December 1st. And along with it, people reporting increasingly being out with groups larger than 10 and of traveling.

No doubt this does reflect the opening up that the governor announced about two weeks ago that went into place the following Wednesday. What remains to be seen of course is what the downstream impact of that will be in terms of the further course of new transmissions. It is of course, at the same time, in the context of increasing numbers of individuals who have received vaccine and the protection that affords. And I'll come back to where we are in the vaccination front in just a few moments.

So for the moment we remain in a much better place than we were a relatively short while ago, but I take the trends reported in this update from our UT Southwestern modeling group as a opportunity to encourage everyone in the UT Southwestern community to continue to keep your guard up, whether you are vaccinated or not. That means wearing your mask and practicing the non-pharmacologic interventions, including physical distancing whenever that's at all possible, which has really been proven now time and again, through the ups and downs of this pandemic to be effective in really reducing the amount of transmission of COVID-19.

On the campus, it's part of the overall encouraging trends that I've referred to, we've seen very little in the way of new infections among the UT Southwestern community. In this month, that's since March first, there have been three instances that we are aware of, of UT Southwestern community members

who acquired COVID-19. And in all three of those instances, as has been the case now for the last two plus months, they were acquired out on the community. That is to say in two months we've not had any employee-to-employee transmission on the campus. And if we look at nonclinical areas of the campus, that's actually now more than three months.

So it does show that between our complying with our university policies that require masks, and physical distancing, and no doubt the fact that the UT Southwestern community has broadly speaking, embraced vaccination, that we've seen the collective positive impact of that. In fact, let me turn to the vaccine update at this point. As of yesterday, approximately 78% of eligible UT Southwestern employees, which is to say all UT Southwestern employees, have received at least one dose of the vaccine, which is great to see. It does mean that there remains 20 plus percent of our community who have, for whatever reason, not yet accepted the opportunity for vaccination. I know there may be many reasons for that. If that is a matter of questions that need to be addressed, I hope you wouldn't hesitate to forward those to, I think, provide the reassurance that, I can say for myself personally, but also obviously for the majority of your colleagues, has been sufficient to realize the benefit of proceeding with vaccination.

It really is not only an instance of protecting yourselves, it's those around you, and collectively we're protecting each other by having the high level of vaccination. The vaccination team that has been working since mid-December to not only provide the vaccine to UT Southwestern employees, but now to community, both our patients and eligible members of the communities who are not our patients, have been doing an absolutely terrific job, and I want to thank them for their extraordinary effort.

As of Monday, we are now providing vaccination at four sites here on the campus, Market Hall, at [Redbird 00:06:33] Mall, who serves the needs of those living in the southern sectors of Dallas, and as of Monday in Richardson, in a facility on the UT Dallas campus to provide easy access for those living more north of the city.

The eligibility criteria have been steadily broadened by the state. So now it not only includes healthcare workers and those 65 and older, or those with a pre-existing condition that predisposes them to a severe COVID illness, but now all those 50 and older, irrespective of any underlying condition, and importantly educators and childcare employees.

And as of a few days ago, we have now vaccinated 105,000 individuals fully against COVID 19, which represents a really tremendous contribution by the UT Southwestern team to the welfare of our overall region.

So this is obviously encouraging, but just to reemphasize what I said just a few moments ago, no reason to let our collective guard down. And at this point I want to remind all of those listening that on the campus masks are required really in any setting other than being alone in an individual office. And also we continue to practice the physical distancing when at all possible. Now, with the trends though that I've tried to summarize for you this morning, we have asked the EROC to develop recommendations for how we might expand our operations looking beyond May 1st. And I do expect to have those recommendations and be able to share them with the campus no later than the next briefing. And really possibly ahead of that, so that we can have a discussion about those when we gather in two weeks. And I want to thank the EOC who have worked really remarkably since the pandemic began, but particularly

intensively in this last week to begin to develop those recommendations so that we can achieve our sort of the balance of our goals, which are to keep the campus safe, but also to advance the mission of UT Southwestern.

And I look forward to receiving those recommendations and with decisions about those to share those with the campus, as I've said in the near future. And that being said, I'm going to spend a few moments here to touch on non-COVID related matters going on, on the campus. And then turned to Jenny Doren, as I have in the past briefing sessions to address questions that you have forwarded since the last time we got together in this virtual format. And so moving beyond COVID, I would hope that any everyone would find the time to participate in a special event that will take place next Friday, March 26th, from 8:30 AM to noon. And that's our third annual celebration of excellence within our health system. This is a proven in the past two years to be a tremendous event in really having a chance to see all of the initiatives and creativity and commitment that are advancing our determination to provide the very best care possible to all who come to us.

And so I hope that you will find the time to join the celebration and learn. And I'm sure if you do attend, also to be inspired. And on the theme of excellence, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate the team responsible for the bone marrow transplant program here at UT Southwestern, which is led by Dr. Bob Collins, but is an enormous multi-disciplinary team that is delivering great care to patients requiring this complex, but life saving treatment of bone marrow transplant. We learned just in this past week from The Center for International Blood and Marrow Transplant Research, which reviews all the bone marrow transplant programs across the country, that UT Southwestern is within the top 10% of those programs. Meaning, providing the very best outcomes to our patients. So congratulations and sincere thanks to every member of the team for their commitment to excellence. Also, for those of you who have had the opportunity to be on South campus, you'll notice... Well, some terrific banners put up by our team in communications, marketing and public affairs to celebrate a match day, which will come on this Friday.

This is the moment when our graduating medical students will learn where they will be going for that next step in their journey to being fully trained physicians. Always a remarkable part of the cycle of UT Southwestern, as we deliver on our commitment to provide trained physicians needed for the communities of North Texas and well beyond. And all of that is ahead of the graduation, which we anticipate in May. Also for our graduate school as another wonderful time on the campus, which allows us to see the incredible work of our learners as they prepare for a career in caring for patients and advancing science. So with that, I'll take this opportunity, although there will be opportunities again before that, those graduation events to congratulate all of our fourth year medical students and graduating graduate students. And with that, I'm going to conclude this briefing and turn to Jenny Doren for your questions. Jenny.

Jenny Doren:

Good morning, Dr. Podolsky. Last week many of us followed closely when the CDC issued its first set of public health recommendations for those who are fully vaccinated and therefore at low risk for severe COVID-19 disease. Will those recommendations alter any of our policies, particularly our travel policies, including the mandatory quarantine after international travel?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, UT Southwestern continues to review on a regular basis the federal, state and local county health jurisdiction guidelines around travel. And our committee, led by Dr. Mack Mitchell, reviews those to provide recommendations on our policy. The recently released CDC recommendations are largely focused on what fully vaccinated individuals can do in private small group settings. And at this time has not updated its travel recommendations and requirements. As they do, we will, of course, incorporate that into any decisions about changes to UT Southwestern policies. As for other practices currently in place, the travel guidelines for UT Southwestern are intended to continue, at least till May 1st in their current state. We'll continue to monitor for changes to the guidance as a higher percentage of the population has the vaccine and as we gain a better understanding of the different viral variants.

Jenny Doren:

I do want to take this opportunity, given some of the additional questions that we've been receiving, provide a bit more clarity for our campus community about what these new CDC guidelines and recent changes by Governor Abbott, which you discussed earlier, mean for us. I do know that we've had a lot of communications that have addressed these topics. But to ensure that everyone is clear on expectations, if employees or faculty are fully vaccinated, are they able to work in public shared office or clinical spaces without masks? And again, I do realize you address that, but it doesn't hurt to just reinforce it. And in addition, is it possible to reopen laboratories to 100% occupancy?

Dr. Podolsky:

As I mentioned just a little while ago this morning, as well as in other forum, including our town hall two weeks ago, our policies and practices on the campus remain unchanged at this time. And that includes any of our satellite facilities, just to be complete about it. Those include wearing a mask or other appropriate face covering, except when alone in an office, maintaining physical distancing, limiting the size of gatherings and using appropriate hand hygiene. Given that we're an academic medical center that cares for a vulnerable patient population, it is especially important that we keep our guard up. Our plan is, as I've said, is to continue our current state of operations, largely if not entirely, as they are through May 1st. And as mentioned, where we go beyond that, we'll be guided by the recommendations of our EROC. The guiding principles for those recommendations will be ensuring the safety of our operations and within that assumption, appropriate policies and practices that optimally advance the mission of our institution. With respect to further expansion of our faculty research operations, that is among the issues that I've asked the EROC to provide guidance on and that will be among the recommendations I expect to be sharing, as mentioned, no later than the time of the next briefing.

So even now though, I do want to remind those investigators who wish to exceed the 50% lab occupancy, that they can request permission by submitting an application to the safety office and emailing biosafety@utsouthwestern.edu. The application can be found on our researcher webpage, and I'm going to leave you for your ingenuity to find the exact link within our webpage for that. It will trigger a site visit by members of the safety office who will examine the requesting faculty member's laboratory and the feasibility of proposed increasing staffing. But as I say, we will be reviewing a board broad

mandate for changes in research operations and communicate those as soon as we've arrived at what we believe are appropriate recommendations.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you for that. As we look ahead to May 1st and phase three, will UT Southwestern consider extending return to campus, to accommodate schools finishing their calendar year and help our working parents who may not have access to childcare?

Dr. Podolsky:

Yes. Our decisions regarding return to campus need to be based primarily on operational businesses, as well as focus on being maintaining safety. However, I'd like to emphasize two things ahead of receiving the recommendations in their particulars from our EROC.

The first is I do not expect that what is going to be forthcoming is a recommendation that in one instance, changes fundamentally everything that we do, but rather what can be done appropriately on an incremental basis. So that's the first point I want to make. And the second is that we will expect supervisors to work with their teams to provide a reasonable basis as there is an ability to return to campus for those who may currently be working remotely, to do that in a way which does take into account other realities, including the need for appropriate childcare and related considerations. So, as I have addressed in questions in past briefing, we will look to our supervisors to really provide guidance and work with individual employees as to what the implications are and how any changes in our operations can be implemented for those working on their teams.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you. Shifting to infection prevention with the FDA's recent approval of the Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine. Can you expand on how safe and effective it is and when is it clinically recommended over Moderna or Pfizer?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, first I want to say that as was the case for the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine, when they were first issued an EUA by the FDA, our team of UT Southwestern experts independently reviewed all the data that were available on the J&J vaccine. And in that basis recommended that we in fact, would deploy it here at UT Southwestern. That is to say that they were confident that the vaccine was both safe and effective. And this team included immunologist, infectious disease experts, epidemiologists, ethicists, and other stakeholders. In fact, the review and assessment of the data for those who are really interested in digging into this is posted on our vaccine website. And the decision is, I would assume most would be aware, is in line with the unanimous vote, recommending the emergency use authorization by the Vaccine Review Advisory Committee, to the FDA and its endorsement by the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices or ACIP.

The J&J vaccine met and exceeded the safety and efficacy thresholds outlined by the FDA and proved to be highly effective at preventing severe COVID-19 disease requiring hospitalization or death. So let me just emphasize something that I think sometimes drops out of the conversation when people hear

efficacy that was lower in an absolute number than the Moderna and Pfizer, first of all, the vaccines were not compared directly. So one really can't make an apples to apples comparison. But most importantly, and none of those vaccine trials, including the J&J did anybody who did acquire a COVID infection subsequent to the vaccine become ill enough to require hospitalization. And certainly none of them were deaths. So from the standpoint of confidence, if you have the J&J that I won't become ill and still most likely will not require COVID-19, you can be fully confident in the vaccine achieving those essential goals.

So, the view of our experts, and this does mirror those of the national authorities, is the best vaccine is the one you can get. And I hope that nobody will hesitate, with maybe one special circumstance, by virtue of which vaccine happens to be available when they have their opportunity to come and be vaccinated, whether it's here or elsewhere. And that one exception is if there is an allergy to the mRNA that would not make the Pfizer or Moderna appropriate, but what would leave you with the option as it's a categorically different type of vaccine with the J&J vaccine.

Jenny Doren:

And as you mentioned, that scientific review document is on both our EDU and.org websites, so very easy to find. When we talk about prevention, we frequently mentioned masking, social distancing and hand hygiene, but are there ways to naturally boost your immune system like through vitamin supplements, exercise, and diet to protect against the virus?

Dr. Podolsky:

So of course, it's always a desirable thing for an individual to maintain their overall health through exercise and a healthy diet, but there are no specific studies or data that show that particular vitamin supplements or other dietary interventions are specifically effective at preventing COVID-19. In fact, the NIH treatment guidelines specifically state that there is insufficient evidence either for or against the use of vitamin C, vitamin D or zinc supplementation in the treatment of COVID-19. Based on the available scientific data emergency use authorized COVID-19 vaccines remained the most effective tool that we have to generate a protective immune response against the virus. And our experience on the UT Southwestern campus confirms their effectiveness at preventing COVID-19. Just to give you a sense of how effective, when we looked at the experience after approximately 60% of those eligible on our campus received the vaccine, the incidence of COVID-19 among those who had received the two doses was decreased by 98% from those on the campus who had not been vaccinated. So I think we have not just the word of the authorities, although we should give those weight because there's scientific evidence behind it, but we have real life experience on our campus that says this works at UT Southwestern.

Jenny Doren:

Yeah, that statistic speaks strongly to say the least. We received another question about employees who are remote and out of state. Are they able to get vaccinated where they live? And if so, how do they acquire a vaccine?

Dr. Podolsky:

Anybody who is working out of state needs to qualify and follow the policies of the state where they live, and as many will be aware, those are quite variable in terms of what priorities are being established for access to vaccines. So we need to consult the guidelines and then how one gets access in your state. The best place for advice, if it's not otherwise available to you, is to turn to your local health department.

Jenny Doren:

This has been a common question since we started administering vaccines. Many of our employees have asked if it is possible to get vaccinations for their spouses and families to protect them from COVID-19. With Parkland allowing spouses to receive a vaccine, will we offer the same to our clinical and frontline staff?

Dr. Podolsky:

I am aware that other vaccine hubs have taken a variety of approach, including what's mentioned by the questioner regarding Parkland. Here at UT Southwestern, we made a decision at the outset that we were going to provide access to vaccine according to the guidelines and directions of the state. And so, yes, we will provide it to a spouse or family member if they are eligible, but not by virtue of being a spouse or a family member per se. And we've maintained that adherence to the state directives. Those have evolved, of course, over the past few months, as the eligibility has been expanded, but we have felt that what's most appropriate for us is to conform with those and not create exceptions.

Jenny Doren:

For our faculty and staff who are frontline workers, do we have policies in place to donate sick or vacation time to help support them?

Dr. Podolsky:

Yes, there is employee policy EMP253 on sick leave, and that policy provides that an employee can donate earned sick leave accruals in any amount to another UT Southwestern employee when they meet the necessary requirements. Employees who receive donated sick leave may use the donated sick leave only as provided in section two of the policy, using accruals. The leave administration division of the office of human resources is responsible for administering the donated sick leave under this policy, including approving or denying request to donate sick leave, tracking leave donated and used, and maintaining appropriate records.

Employees should use the required forms available from leave administration in order to donate sick leave or receive donated sick leave. I would refer everybody to our policy library, which you can find online to learn more, or reach out to our leave administration office and they'll be glad to provide further details to you.

Jenny Doren:

Finally, ending with a non COVID-related question that we received. Many of us over the years have enjoyed seeing our south campus ducks in the spring. Why is there netting over the courtyard? And is anybody making sure that the birds and other animals don't get trapped?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I've been waiting for this question, and it's one that I will assure those who are the duck lovers on the campus was not made easily, but for a number of considerations. To begin with, the courtyard is not a natural habitat for wild ducks and other migratory birds, and the artificial water feature and hand feeding is not good for their health. The netting was installed by facilities to discourage ducks from nesting in the courtyard, and was made not to encourage a return to the area.

In addition, the ducks create significant challenges that result in an unhealthy and unsanitary environment for staff responsible for maintaining the fountain and the landscaping in this area, and we do take seriously the welfare of our terrific facilities teams. The facilities team are checking the area for birds and other animals that could be trapped behind the net on a regular basis, throughout the day and evening and including weekends. And if they are identified, they pull the netting back to allow birds and other animals to get out. So I would just say, for those who love ducks, you still are left to enjoy, as I do, the egrets, which have returned to campus in the past week, and look forward to the fall, when the monarchs also make a stop at the UT Southwestern campus.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you for your time.