

March 31, 2021, Weekly Briefing Transcript

Dr. Podolsky: Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, President of UT Southwestern Medical Center. And I'm very pleased to welcome you to this biweekly briefing to update the UT Southwestern community. And I will say there is a fair amount of ground to cover this morning. So I'm going to dig right in, and after though I've covered this update, we'll turn to questions, which will be posed as in all past briefings by Jenny Doren.

So I'm certainly very glad to be able to say that in the two weeks, since the last briefing, we continue to see really very favorable trends with respect to new cases of COVID, numbers of patients requiring hospitalization, as well as trends in vaccination, which I'll come to cover in a little more detail shortly.

Specifically on the campus, we have seen a census in Clements University Hospital in the low teens now for several days. And similarly at Parkland, we're caring for now as few as 16 patients as of yesterday. Remarkable, when you consider that it was not that long ago in January, when that was in the 150 to 160 range. And this reflects trends within the broad region of North Texas.

Also within the campus, reflective of the safe environment that we've been able to say now for a really many months, in the last week, we've had one instance of a member of the UT Southwestern community acquiring COVID-19, and that was in the community setting. And really at this juncture, we have gone more than two months on the campus without a single instance of on-campus transmission, whether from employee to employee or patient to employee.

So I have no doubt that's the impact of the UT Southwestern community as a whole to maintaining masking, physical distancing, other non-pharmacologic interventions, as well as of course, the impact of vaccines as we have proceeded in our vaccination campaign. And again, I'll come back to that in just a couple of minutes.

It is likely that we will continue to see these favorable trends for the next few weeks at least. Having had the opportunity to review the latest update from our UT Southwestern modeling group, which was shared very early this morning and will be publicly posted within the next day or so, it suggests that, again, we'll continue to see a slowly declining numbers of individuals requiring hospitalizations and the rates of transmission in the region broadly. I will note that some of the reason behind the declining number of patients is the length of stay for those requiring hospitalization has fallen progressively, while the number of admissions has stayed somewhat on a steady state these last several days.

So there are certainly a number of factors that play that ultimately result in the census in the hospital. And I would add as another variable in terms of the pattern of transmission, as we may find it in the weeks ahead, the intrusion into North Texas of the variants of virus, which have been reported elsewhere in the world. And I will say at this point that we are looking at the specimens received from our patients and found to be positive, to characterize them on a molecular basis for whether they reflect one of these variants.

And this has been tremendous work and partnership between our clinical laboratory under the leadership of Ravi Sarode and Dr. Jeff Purcell and the McDermott Center under the leadership of Dr.

Helen Hobbs. An in looking at our samples, we do find that there is a growing proportion that are the so-called UK variant, which many of you will probably be aware from reports in the media is known to have a higher transmissibility. And we will continue to be vigilant to look for other variants because of the potential impact that could have over the coming weeks and months of the pandemic.

Let me then turn to the matter of vaccines to first of all, acknowledge the extraordinary work of the teams under the health system who have continued to make great strides in making vaccines available and making it a good experience for those coming to UT Southwestern, to take advantage of that opportunity. As of this morning, we have provided more than 215,000 shots of vaccine. That's approximately 130,000 individuals who have at least received one dose of vaccine from a UT Southwestern-run site.

On our campus, I was very glad to learn last week that there has been steady uptake of the vaccine by employees who may not have jumped at the opportunity in the first few weeks it's available, but at this point 78% of our UT Southwestern community is vaccinated. And look forward to seeing that number continue to go upward. And I can tell you it's had a huge impact as we reported in the New England Journal last week. To give you some sense of that, we looked at a number of COVID-19 infections among our employees who had not been vaccinated compared to those who had received at least one dose or both doses by the end of January. And among those who had not been vaccinated, 2.6% by that point had had a COVID infection. Whereas those who have been fully vaccinated, it was 0.05%. If you do the arithmetic, that's a 98% reduction among those who received both vaccines compared to those who had not been vaccinated at all.

And so that's been a huge benefit to us in the health of our UT Southwestern community, but also in being available to do the work that needs to be done because as would follow from that progress, we had very few people by early February, who were in self-isolation and self-quarantine compared to the hundreds literally that were in that circumstance back in December.

So I share that news to reassure you that this campaign is having a great impact here on the campus. And we can only hope that that kind of broad uptake across the region will lead to similar good effects on the communities of North Texas. And I would say to those of you who, for whatever reason as yet have not taken advantage of the opportunity to get the vaccine, I hope you'll make that decision both for your own benefit and as a way of helping your community. And for those of you who have been vaccinated, please don't miss an opportunity when it arises, when you find yourself in conversation with friends or family who have expressed some reluctance to encourage them for those very same reasons. So we've made progress, but clearly still more is needed. And with that, I want to turn to what I know is of great interest and concern to the UT Southwestern community. Back in November, I communicated the decision that was made with the benefit of input from our EROC group and the leadership of the institution that we would continue in our so-called phase two operations through May 1st. And so this morning, I would like to share with you the plans looking beyond the beginning of May, and just to tell you that our plans have been based on guidance and recommendations from the EROC. They were first asked to consider what criteria would be appropriate for us to make judgements about expanding, or if circumstances warranted, restricting the operations on campus. And they formulated, I think, a very compelling and robust set of criteria.

They included internal facts such as... What is the census in our hospital? How many new diagnosed cases of COVID-19 have there been? What is our adequacy of supply of personal protective equipment? And others, including rate of vaccination. And also, external criteria. What is the extent of new cases in our region? Also forward-looking criteria, which means, what does our UT Southwestern model project? And I will say that with those criteria, at this point in time, we find them in the green, rather than the yellow or red zone, really across all of them. And on that basis, I this morning would like you to know that come May 1st, we will indeed begin the transition to phase three operations. And as I will go through those at least briefly here in the next several minutes, I want to make you aware that later this morning, I will be sending a communication to the campus summarizing what I'm about to describe, and the details of which will be posted on our website as well as answers to what we expect will be frequently asked questions.

So before turning to some of the particulars of the transition to phase three operations, I want to take this opportunity to once again thank the members of the EROC, and especially Dr. Will Daniel, who's chaired it with Dr. Bruce Brown, who's in charge of our business continuity and emergency preparedness. They've done incredible work over the past year and continue to be great stewards of our institutional planning. Now, let me then turn to some of the changes that will take place with transition to phase three. But before I do, I'm going to tell you what won't change. During phase three, masks will still be required in all UT Southwestern facilities, with the exception of the instance where someone is alone in an office. So that will not change. We will create a little more flexibility with respect to the requirement for masks outdoors. And so come May 1st, it will be permissible to forego wearing a mask outdoors as long as physical distancing is possible. If the circumstances do not make physical distancing feasible, than a mask will still be required outdoors.

So moving on to the other aspects of the changing, beginning May 1st, personnel may return to the office full-time. All personnel may return to the office full-time, remain remote, or work a blended schedule based on management assessment of roles in line with the institutional policy. Our HR team will be providing new tools and capabilities in April that will help establish the best work environment for each individual as we move forward. So I know this probably as much as any other aspect of phase three will be of particular impact for those who have not been working onsite on the UT Southwestern campus or at its satellites, but wanted to emphasize that what is the right way to proceed will be to a degree individualized, at least by group led by our managers. And as I've already said and will reemphasize, more information about the plan for any given group and individual within it will be developed over this next month.

Our schools will resume in-person classes and other educational activities. This is likely to be done in a somewhat graduated manner. Our deans and other members of the Office of Academic Affairs are in advanced planning for that sequencing of bringing together small groups ultimately in May, with the possibility of holding large group lectures in our lecture halls. And so in-person classes and other educational activities will be permissible under the phase three campus operations. I should emphasize here, and maybe will emphasize again before I conclude my remarks, that this is still in the context of the requirement to wear masks, and also wherever possible, to maintain physical distancing.

I next want to turn to the laboratory environment. As those who work in that environment are aware, there has been an option of seeking exemption from the current level of 50% capacity requiring review by

administration to ensure that the specific spaces of a given laboratory are amenable to safe operations. Coming May 1st, the lab operations will return to 100% capacity with the requirement as in other environments that masking will be continued at all times. And wherever possible, the physical distancing will be maintained, and this will be without prior review. It is a broad approval just to make the distinction from where we are now to where we will be next month. In addition to those, the areas that I've covered, and there's certainly more detail, as mentioned, that will be posted and shared on our website, we will be, for example, increasing the number of individuals who may ride our shuttles at the time. We will be reopening spaces that support our educational mission, including the library. Other activities will be expanded as circumstances warrant. For example, we expect that by late June, we will be in a position to open a fitness center. Now, I say that as an expectation. The decision will, for that and others, be made on the basis of the circumstances as we approach those further dates.

I am confident that with the progress that's been made and I've now spoken about this morning and the uptake of vaccine by our campus community and our commitment to maintaining the practices, which have kept our campus a safe environment even when vaccines were not yet available, that we will, even with these expanded activities, be able to carry on our mission and do so while maintaining the safety of those who work at UT Southwestern and those who come to UT Southwestern for help.

And so, with that, I'm going to spend now a few moments covering some other topics before we turn to your question, and I want to start by mentioning the call for nominations for our Spirit of Caring Award. Due to the philanthropic support of a UT Southwestern supporter, we have a new and unique opportunity to honor the unwavering dedication of our colleagues on the front lines who work to protect the health and safety of our community. As I hope many of you read on the intranet page, nominations are now open for the Spirit of Caring Award. Recipients will be selected from among staff and faculty who have been working on campus throughout the pandemic, and who exemplify UT Southwestern values of excellence, innovation, teamwork, and compassion. And I want to emphasize that this is really working anywhere across the campus during this pandemic. It's to include, of course, our clinical venues, but really throughout the entirety of our campus.

Nominations are being accepted up until this Friday, April 2nd, and they will then be reviewed by members of our various leadership teams, human resources, and employee advisory council. Awardees will be notified the week of April 19th, and each will be awarded a certificate and \$150 as a thank you for their exceptional efforts. To make a nomination, you can click on the highlighted Spirit of Caring banner on the intranet page.

Moving on, I do want to take note of a really important event that happened a few days after our previous briefing, and that was match day for our fourth year medical students. I'm pleased to be able to say that, once again, our students were highly desired by our own institution, but institutions across Texas and really across the country. And I congratulate all of our soon to be new graduates for the opportunities they are going to have in their next stage in their journey to becoming a fully prepared physicians, to undertake their residency training in some of the most outstanding programs across the country.

I reference them as soon to be graduates. I'm pleased to say that we will have our medical school commencement on May 8th. It will take place in person on the McDermott Plaza. It will be limited in the numbers of attendees, and will take place with a physical distancing, but at least there will be some

opportunity for us to celebrate the achievements of our students as they complete their medical curriculum. In line with that, we'll have the same opportunity to congratulate, and in person, the achievements of our graduate students at their commencement on the Plaza on May 20th. And ahead of those, let me offer a congratulations for having gotten to this point. And I look forward to offering those congratulations in person on May 8th and May 20th for the medical school and graduate school respectively.

Turning to another extremely important mention of our efforts on UT Southwestern and our commitment to our mission, I'd like to make note of some events that are highlighting our commitment to diversity, inclusion and equity. First of all, I would note that we are concluding today National Women's History Month, and our final commemorative event is being held this afternoon, hosted by the Office of Institutional Equity and Access and the Women and Allies BRG at noon. Please consider joining the virtual panel discussion with several of our UT Southwestern female leaders as they discuss their own experience in forging their professional paths. You do need to register. It's easy to do and hope you'll be able to join. Join us at noon.

Finally, also in highlighting our commitment to diversity and inclusion, I'd like to thank Dr. Helen Yin for her leadership in planning and moderating an event yesterday, which was held to support our UT Southwestern Asian community in response to the increasing anti-Asian racism plaguing our nation. As I've communicated in past briefings in the 12 plus years that I have served as the president of UT Southwestern, from the beginning diversity, equity, inclusion have been a cornerstone of what makes UT Southwestern what it is. And that will continue to be so, and I would hope that each of you feels that you carry the responsibility of that commitment.

And with that, I'm going to conclude this briefing. So we do have time for your questions and thank you for your joining this morning. Jenny?

Jenny Doren: Good morning, Dr. Podolsky. I believe this briefing marks a year since your first briefing early last April, and how far we have come. You provided a very nice overview of phase three, and that has undoubtedly spurred a number of new questions. So I want to spend the remainder of our time diving a little bit deeper. Our first question, I believe you effectively covered, which was asking about the criteria that factored into our decision to move to phase three. Second question, you also addressed, but I just want to make sure people are very clear on this. It's a multi-part question. As more of our staff, faculty and learners soon return to campus, will the group gathering and meeting limit increased to more than 10 individuals and will masks still be required? In addition, can laboratories open to 100% occupancy?

Dr. Podolsky: I'm glad to have that question because I realize I did not address that in my overview of some of the changes that we were planning. And just to remind those listening where we are currently, and that is gatherings are limited to 10 individuals, and all must be masked regardless of vaccination status and physical distancing observed. This is an instance where we are going to be moving in a sequential stepwise fashion when you look at the totality of the changes that will ultimately comprise phase three operations. And what I mean by that is having shared the things that will change on May 1, this realm will remain in place. We do expect, assuming all the trends continue in the same generally positive direction, that we will be expanding that limit probably at the end of May. It will be with the

stipulation that it will be likely limited to the number of people in a given space who can still maintain the physical distancing rather than necessarily the absolute numbers. So obviously that would mean a larger number of people in Gooch Auditorium than would be acceptable in a smaller conference room.

Jenny Doren: And I want to stay on the topic of masking for a little bit more. I know you talked about some relaxing rules come May 1st with regards to masking in particular if you're walking outside, so long as you can effectively social distance, are there any other instances in which we wouldn't need to wear a mask or perhaps social distance that you can think of?

Dr. Podolsky: Well, the masking is a little more straightforward, the answer is no. Other than the exception that has been in place now for many months, and that is a person working in an office alone. But outside of that, within the facilities, masks will be required. And let me also mention two other things that will remain unchanged. We will continue to have the limited points of access that we have now had for most of the past years. There may be a benefit to that which will go well beyond the time when we're coping with a pandemic. And the second is in our clinical facilities, both a hospital and outpatient settings, temperature checks will continue to be required. And in terms of physical distancing, you may have gotten the sense and correctly so from my comments, that we are allowing more flexibility around physical distancing, and the stipulation is whenever possible. So that's an underlying premise in expanding the permissible level of activity in our laboratories and in expanding what we're doing as in-person learning.

Jenny Doren: I'm glad that you touched upon temperature screenings, you mentioned that those will continue in those clinical environments. That was part of our next question. The other part of it, are there any changes to the policy if an employee tests positive for COVID-19?

Dr. Podolsky: The short answer is no. Employees who test positive for COVID-19 must follow our current occupational health procedures, and those are outlined in the COVID-19 employee illness guidelines, which are available for our website. So what has changed is, and it's not relative to May 1, it's already in place for those who are vaccinated who have had an exposure, where we previous to or if not vaccinated, required isolation or quarantining, is not required in the absence of any symptoms. Just self monitoring for symptoms is now what's stipulated in those policies.

Jenny Doren: Thank you. I know you touched on this one as well, but because we are receiving a few questions from our learners, I want to make sure that they're clear on this. What about our common areas, student facilities. What's opening?

Dr. Podolsky: Yes, we will reopen the library and student common areas beginning May 1, as long as masking and physical distancing are maintained. I've mentioned it, but I'll repeat it, we anticipate reopening the gym at the end of June, or maybe you should read that as July 1. Again, assuming circumstances seem appropriate at that time.

Jenny Doren: Thank you. So you mention in-person academic classes, so let's skip ahead to parking. What changes, if any, can we expect come May 1st? And if we've previously canceled our parking permit, which many of us have done, how do we get access again?

Dr. Podolsky: So parking will be open for patients, visitors and staff, including both self parking and valet. If you have previously canceled your parking, you can visit the UT Southwestern parking website to order a new permit. This can be completed before you return to campus, but you need VPN access to connect to the parking website.

Jenny Doren: I want to end with our most frequently asked question since the start of the pandemic, will employees have the option to stay remote, and how was the decision made regarding who should return to campus?

Dr. Podolsky: The decision, first of all, is in the context of our confidence in the safety of the environment. If we didn't believe it was a safe environment, none of this would be a matter of discussion, but it is a safe environment. As now to the question that I know is on many people's minds as to what is the basis for that determination, I'll say in the most general, maybe philosophical sense, in what way can a person most effectively advance the mission of UT Southwestern in how they do the work? So right now that decision is within the context of our policy 162, telecommuting allowed for remote work for appropriate roles prior to the pandemic, and we will continue to keep this policy in place. We are working to develop a matrix, as it were, to help supervisors, managers, directors, make the determination as to whether the work that a given person does, can be truly as effectively carried out entirely remotely or requires to be entirely on campus. Or as I expect, will be certainly more the case than was in place before the pandemic in a hybrid of those two.

So, as I mentioned, this is the work of this month to really go through that work with managers and for them to work with their teams to make that important judgment.

Jenny Doren: Thank you for your time.

Dr. Podolsky: Thank you, and I hope you all have a very safe and productive rest of the week.