

Banner Health | transcript

Our first question comes from Mike Pelton at ABC 15 here in Phoenix. How concerned are you about the COVID variant, and how do you account for and plan for what that might mean for your hospitals?

So there's still a lot unknown about the COVID variant and what it will do to the spread of COVID-19 in our communities. For this reason, we continue to stress what I've spoken about in my opening comments. When it's your turn to get your vaccine, please get vaccinated. We need to continue to vaccinate as quickly as possible.

We must continue the mitigation efforts, both at the mitigation level, the enforcement level, and the personal accountability level. We can all do our share. Wearing an appropriate mask, shrinking your circles, washing your hands, and of course, not going out when you're ill will help us go through whatever that variant brings into our communities in the best possible way if we all do it together.

Mike Pelton at ABC 15 asked another question. What is the status of the refrigerated truck that was in use to supplement morgue space at Baylor University Medical Center Phoenix?

Thank you. We still continue to have refrigerated trucks to take care of those individuals for storage. I do not have those exact numbers with me here today. We can get those and follow up to you after the press conference.

Next question comes from Megan McNeil at KOLD TV in Tucson. She asks, cases and inpatient hospitalization seem to be decreasing. ICU COVID patients and ventilator usage are too, but not along the same curve as new cases and inpatient beds. Does this suggest more severe cases?

So I believe, as we've talked about, the way that we track the COVID-19 illness in our communities is that first, you see percent positivity, then you take a look at cases, then you take a look at hospitalizations, then you take a look at ICU ventilators, and then you have a lagging indicator, which is the death rate. So at this time, it's not unexpected that our ICU capacity remains high because that is a little bit more of a lagging indicator. In addition to that, as I said in my opening comments, we are also seeing an increased utilization of ICU capacity for patients with non-COVID illness as well.

We remain very busy. We'll continue to track those numbers along with you. And as always, I'll just ask everybody to continue to do your part. Shrink your circles and please wear your mask appropriately.

Megan McNeil at KOLD TV in Tucson asks another question. I would think travel nursing contracts would be ending sometime soon. Any idea how many nurses you all will lose in the coming days/weeks? How is the staffing situation?

So our staffing situation has improved, but I do want to stress that we remain very busy. We manage our external contracted labor and all of our labor and our staffing needs literally on an hour by hour, day by day basis. We do expect for external contracted labor individuals to begin to leave the Banner Health system as we have a reduction in numbers, and we are going to sequence that very carefully to make sure that we have the staffing that we need for all of our upcoming needs. Remember, in addition to being still very busy as I described for COVID-19, we are also starting to increase our surgeries and procedures.

In addition to getting back into that business for those patients that need those medically necessary surgeries, we also have a backlog of individuals who had their surgeries and their procedures delayed that need to get their surgeries and procedures done. So it's a delicate balance that we do all the time during winter. It's a little bit more complicated, of course, now during COVID-19 season. But our intent is to make sure we manage it adequately so we can take care of all of you, both COVID and non-COVID needs.

Next question comes from Stephanie Innes at the *Arizona Republic*. Are you concerned about Super Bowl Sunday gatherings causing another spike in local illness?

So certainly, any gathering of individuals with whom you don't live with offers the opportunity for spread to occur. So similar to what we've been talking about every time in front of you, we ask you to shrink your circles, when you're with others that you don't live with to wear your mask appropriately, and certainly, do not go out and gather with individuals if you are not feeling well. We hope that everybody can take appropriate precautions so that we do not have another spike post this upcoming Super Bowl Sunday like we did after Christmas, for instance. So please, shrink your circles and wear your mask appropriately.

Rebecca Moreno from KVOA TV4 in Tucson asks, do you believe that phase 1b has fallen behind in Arizona, or do you believe we're on target?

So as you may know, phase 1b is a little bit different at the county-level versus some of the state-level pods. At this time, it still appears that we have quite a significant demand for individuals that fit the phase 1b indications, specifically those who are very vulnerable, which are those that are over the age of 75. Most of our hospitals are in the Maricopa County region and we continue to work very closely with our Maricopa County colleagues to cadence the phasing of opening that up further to others that are vulnerable. So please stay tuned to those communications and we will continue to work collaboratively with our counties on that.

Next question is from Bailey Miller over at Fox 10 in Phoenix. Bailey asks two questions, so I will ask you the first question. What do you attribute the decline in numbers to?

So some of the decline in numbers is very multifactorial, of course. As you tracked along with us, what the cases were doing and what the hospitalizations were doing, we know that we had significant spike post-Thanksgiving. And we also had a significant spike post-Christmas. So, again, by not having those gatherings, that has helped decline the number of cases. In addition to that, that is somewhat of the natural cadence for a pandemic is that you have spikes, and then you decline from those spikes.

I'd also like to say thank you to everybody in the community for taking personal accountability. As we all work together and shrink our circles and wear our masks appropriately, we can continue to suppress the amount of activity of COVID-19 in our communities to help really protect those who are most vulnerable. So I do want to say thank you to all of you who are wearing your masks and shrinking your circles.

And so Bailey's second question from Fox 10-- what more do you think needs to be done to continue on this decline?

So, again, personal accountability is so incredibly important. We cannot let our guard down. We should not get too optimistic about the fact that cases are declining. As we have the variants-- the UK variant, and potentially other variants, including South African variant-- possibly spread and enter into our communities, which is likely to happen, we need to remember that these variants look to be much more contagious.

So we've got to not let our guard down. We must continue to shrink our circles and wear our masks appropriately. In addition to that, it is very important for us to get vaccinated. We are going as fast as we can. We're waiting for additional supplies, as I'm sure everybody is aware of. And we look forward to additional manufacturers, hopefully, to be able to apply to the FDA and also get emergency use authorization.

When it is your turn to get vaccinated, please do so. Please also be patient. Sometimes it takes more than a couple of attempts to get your appointment scheduled. So we ask you to continue to be dedicated to that process and continue to attempt to get an appointment so that you can get vaccinated and protect yourself.

Rebeca Moreno from KVOA TV 4 in Tucson asks, what do you do with vaccines that aren't

administered to people that might miss their appointment? Are they discarded?

So, again, in my opening comments, I think I was very clear that we absolutely, as a vaccinator, understand the responsibility that is upon us. And we take that responsibility so incredibly to heart. We work very hard to not waste any vaccine. I do like to remind everybody that there are certain components of how this vaccine comes to us and how we prepare it to go into arms that sometimes make the vaccine unusable. Unusable means perhaps the syringe malfunctioned, perhaps the vial was cracked, perhaps the cold chain storage was not where it needed to be.

Those vaccines are discarded for your safety. And that is a very normal process for the COVID-19 vaccine, as well as for all vaccines. For wastage, we have very minimal wastage. We have a process of overbooking appointments. We have a process for end of day to make sure that every single vaccine that has been reconstituted for use goes into somebody's arm. At this time, that wastage is very minimal. We've gotten better and better at it since the day that we first started, of course, back in December. And we are absolutely committed to getting the vaccine into the arms.

Max Gordon at 3TV and CBS 5 here in Phoenix has two questions he's asking. So I'll ask you the first question, Dr. Bessel. Are you seeing any issues in the COVID-19 vaccine supply chain?

So the issues in the COVID-19 vaccine supply chain continue to remain. We have more demand than we have supply. That's at the federal level. That's at the state level. That's at county level. And then, of course, that means that's at our vaccination and pod level. We continue to work collaboratively with our Department of Health individuals that are in the different counties where we provide vaccination. But we do need more vaccine. There's not enough of it in this country at this time to meet the demand.

Max Gordon's second question, what do you think needs to be done to increase vaccine supply?

So that really is happening at the federal level through those arrangements with the manufacturers. Again, as I said, previously, we look forward to hopefully additional manufacturers, in addition to Pfizer and Moderna, to be able to get emergency use authorization through the FDA. At this time, we believe that that is the Johnson & Johnson vaccine that is next up.

Just as a reminder, that vaccine does not have the same cold chain storage requirements that Pfizer and Moderna have, so that makes it a little bit easier to deal with. And also it's a single dose. So we don't have to deal with the appointment that comes 21 or 28 days after the first dose. That will make a big difference in being able to get more people vaccinated.

Megan McNeil at KOLD TV in Tucson asks, because numbers are looking better, and I don't believe triage was ever reached-- please correct me if I'm wrong-- would you say the governor's guidance not closing down indoor dining, schools, et cetera, during the large winter spike, was correct?

So I do want to assure everybody out there that, luckily, fortunately, thank goodness, we did not meet a triage situation. I do believe that we were relatively potentially close to that had our peak not occurred when it did and start to decline when it did. Our health care systems were very busy. We were very, very stressed, both during the summer peak, as I described earlier, as well as this peak.

In addition to that, my comments regarding mitigation, enforcement, and personal accountability are not just to avoid triage-- which, of course, is something that nobody would ever want to reach-- but also to help protect those in the community who may be suffering from disease, even if they get through it at their home, more moderate disease that requires them to have to go to an urgent care or an emergency department for treatment, and, of course, those who have suffered significantly by having to be hospitalized, being in our ICUs, and being on our ventilators, and those that have suffered mortality and death, and the impact of that on them, their family, and their friends.

So mitigation helps to reduce cases, ED visits, urgent care visits, hospitalizations, IC requirements, ventilatory requirements, and death.

Paula Blankenship with The Hertel Report asks two questions. So I will read the first question to you, Dr. Bessel. What is the vaccination rate for health care workers at Banner?

We do not have that statistic. As you may know, we did not make the vaccine mandatory, and it is not mandatory at this time. In addition to that, many of our employees have been vaccinated outside of a Banner pod, through the local county process, going to pods that are being stood up by other health care systems. And we thank our other health care systems for participating with us, for being vaccination pods.

Because of patient privacy conditions, it is not mandatory for individuals, at this time, to have told us whether or not they received the vaccine. Going forward, we do understand that there are going to be requirements coming through HHS for us to gather that information. We are working on plans, of course, to be compliant with those upcoming regulations. But up until this point, it has not been a requirement for employees to inform their employer whether or not they've been vaccinated.

So the second question that Paula Blankenship from The Hertel Report asks, how are you overcoming any vaccine resistance?

Yeah, so vaccine resistance, or vaccine hesitancy, is something that we frequently face, regardless of which vaccine you might be speaking about. We continue to provide transparent, honest, timely, frequent communication to our employees and to the communities that we serve about the benefits of vaccine, and be honest about the side effects that somebody may experience post-vaccination.

In addition to that, we communicate frequently and try to make appointments available for those that are in health care who have been prioritized in that phase 1A, to make sure that they have every opportunity to get vaccinated. We also have been able to receive vaccine for our hospitals so that some individuals who may have had more difficulty scheduling or making an appointment that requires a drive have had an opportunity to receive vaccine closer to their workplace.

We will continue to do all of those things, both for our own employees, as well as the patients in the communities that we serve, so that many individuals will make the choice to get vaccinated so we can bring this pandemic to an end.