

# Dr. Bessel Press Conference 2/17

## Script

Arizona continues to see a decline in COVID-19 cases, positivity rate, hospitalizations, patients in the ICU and ventilator usage. These trends are exactly what we would like to see, and we hope that they will continue in the weeks to come. As I have mentioned to you before, we expect that our descent from this surge will take much longer than our decline from the summer surge.

Our Arizona ICUs remain busy, currently at an occupancy 10% higher than what we would see at the peak of a normal winter. Some Banner ICUs are still operating at 150% of their licensed bed capacity.

Banner continues to contract roughly 1,900 external workers to support our COVID patient volumes. We are working to strategically ramp down these contract labor assignments while ensuring that enough frontline workers remain at the bedside to care for our high volume and acuity of patients.

As of Monday we no longer have restrictions in place for elective surgeries. Our no visitor policy remains active. It is based on community positivity rates. I anticipate that we will ease those restrictions in the coming week if positivity rate continues to trend down, and we will notify the media when this occurs.

I'm pleased to share that this week Banner reached another important milestone – exceeding 200,000 vaccines administered by our organization. This is such important work and we are so proud to be a part of it.

For those of you still waiting to receive your vaccine, please be patient and keep trying to schedule an appointment if you qualify. It may take you a few tries before you find a site that has availability to accommodate you. I know it has been a frustrating experience for many who are trying to book appointments. Vaccine supply in our state is still limited, but efforts are ramping up this week with additional pop-up sites from Maricopa County and the federal pharmacy program launching at many pharmacies across the state. Maricopa County also launched its interactive vaccine finder map that will help you identify a location near you where the vaccine is available. Currently all appointments at the Banner PODs in Maricopa County are booked. We will open additional appointment blocks as we receive more vaccine supply.

For those who have been fully vaccinated, we ask that you continue to adhere to CDC recommendations of distancing and masking. While we are confident in the vaccine's effectiveness in protecting the person who has been vaccinated, we are still unsure if those who have been vaccinated can contract COVID-19 and spread it to others. Research to determine this is ongoing. That said, some of the preliminary findings regarding effectiveness in preventing spread to others look promising.

Two studies conducted in Israel concluded that those who received the Pfizer vaccine who still get infected with COVID-19 carry less in their bodies than unvaccinated people who are infected. If the vaccines do reduce the spread of the virus, it means that even people who aren't vaccinated will gain protection from the vaccinated people around them. That is great news and I look forward to reviewing additional research on this topic as more studies are published about the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines.

Some of you may question why you should even get the vaccine if it doesn't prevent you from getting infected. Let me remind you that the current vaccines that are approved under emergency use authorization are extremely effective in protecting you – the person who is vaccinated – from experiencing severe illness and hospitalization due to COVID-19. While it is still possible for you to become infected with asymptomatic COVID-19, it is a much better option than serious illness or death.

The number one concern that we have seen expressed by consumers who are hesitant about getting the COVID-19 vaccine is due to the side effects that they might experience. I can assure you that – as a clinician and an advocate for all vaccines, including the COVID-19 vaccine – the side effects that you will experience as a result of vaccination are much more mild in comparison to what you could experience if you

contract COVID and become seriously ill. Please keep that in mind when you are making the decision to get vaccinated.

We've also been asked when things can return to normal. When can you hang out your friends again? When can you stop wearing masks? When can you schedule your next vacation? While there is no definitive timeline, here are some of the things that public health experts are watching to make that determination. We need to see community positivity rates below 5% and the R-naught below 1. In addition, high vaccination rates are necessary. When all these things occur and we have roughly 70-85% herd immunity, it is likely that you'll see recommendations from our public health experts regarding easing of current restrictions.

Until then, I ask you to continue to shrink your circle, wear a mask and get the vaccine when it is made available to you. We need everyone to do their part.