

Banner Health | 12-14-21 Press Conference Transcript_2

Barbara Villa from Arizona News Radio asks, what's the future potential of omicron worsening to the point to further burdening hospital space?

We really just don't know yet what is going to happen as that particular variant continues to make its way into the United States and into the state of Arizona, as well as other states where Banner Health operates. Looking at what is happening in other parts of the world, of course, we remain concerned. The doubling capacity of that particular variant appears to be very, very large. And I would expect that, over the upcoming weeks, we will see a large increase of that variant in the COVID cases that we are experiencing.

There is still a lot yet for us to discover about what that means, for severity of illness and need for hospitalization, but yet we know there are many things that we can all do to help preserve the health care capacity that we know that we all need. Please do get vaccinated. It's especially important at this time, if you are eligible for a booster, to get your COVID booster.

Stephanie Innes from the *Arizona Republic* asks, just double-checking that your forecasting sees hospitalizations in Arizona peaking in mid-January, or is it positive cases that will peak in mid-January?

Our forecast is for our peak hospital census to occur in mid-January, which, according to our forecasts, also coincides with peak COVID cases. Again, this forecast is being reviewed on a very frequent basis. And just to the previous question that I answered, we still do not yet know what the impact of the omicron variant might be in our forecast. There's lots that our community can do to help us. Please seek care at the appropriate level of care, get vaccinated if you're unvaccinated, and get your COVID booster.

Howard Fischer with Capitol Media Services asks, you keep urging vaccinations and masking. Are you ready to call on the governor to mandate those?

So I'm asking the community to assist us in preserving health care capacity for all of you. I believe that each one of us can make a personal decision to do our part. So please, do your part. Get your COVID vaccine if unvaccinated, get your booster if eligible, and when you're out-- especially in congregate, indoor settings-- please wear your mask.

Holly Dorman from *Torrington Telegram* asks, how is Banner Health prepared to handle new variants like omicron?

So we just don't know enough about this new variant. But what we do know is that it looks like it's highly contagious. And what we do know is that vaccine looks like it will still have an impact on those that get ill and those that may require hospitalization. So going back to what we all can do as members of our community, get vaccinated, get your COVID booster, and mask when you're in indoor, congregate settings.

Brahm Resnik from 12 News here in Phoenix asks, what does contingency level of care mean, and what things are being done differently?

So in contingency level of care, it means that we're not at our normal operations. It means things like we might be doing less documentation than we previously do. It means things like we may be having staff working different types of units that they don't normally work in. There are a number of different things that Banner Health has done throughout this pandemic to meet the needs of the community, and we will continue to do those things. We ask you to help our hospitals and our frontline staff. Please, get vaccinated, get your COVID booster, and mask when you're in indoor, congregate settings to help us out.

Pearla Shaheen from KGUN 9 in Tucson asks, what is your response to the rising numbers of omicron cases in Arizona?

So it's very early for us, both in the United States as well as in the state of Arizona, as well as in other states where Banner Health operates. I suspect that we will learn a lot over the upcoming weeks, but we do a number of different things already. We know that vaccination can still help against this variant, we know that boosters can help against this variant, and we know that masking does help reduce the spread of this virus from one infected individual to another. So we can all do our part by getting vaccinated, booster vaccinations, and masking up when we are in indoor, congregate settings.

Holly Dorman with the *Torrington Telegram* asks, how have employees taken to Banner Health's vaccine mandate?

So Banner Health's COVID mandatory vaccination deadline has already passed us. So we have 100% compliance with our mandatory policy. We have over 90% of our team members who are fully vaccinated. Of those that are not vaccinated, they received appropriate medical and religious exemptions. So we are here to serve you. We are a safe place to get care. And I want to thank all of our frontline health care heroes who got vaccinated to help protect themselves as well as our community at large.

Jasmine Ramirez from KOLD News 13 in Tucson asks, with the ICU being so full, what wait time is there for beds for people who are having other types of surgery? So she's got two questions. That's the first question.

So I'm going to go back to my opening comments, where I did indicate that our ICUs are very full and that we are evaluating on a daily basis, facility by facility, our ability to provide medically necessary surgeries and procedures. For those surgeries and procedures that require an ICU stay, we are and have experienced postponements. I would, again, remind all of us that medically indicated, prescheduled surgeries and procedures are necessary for many people.

If we delay these too long, those individuals may then need an emergency surgery, which is very impactful to them and can produce less ideal outcomes. Asking everybody to please assist us in that. Please get vaccinated, get your booster shot, and mask up when you're indoors.

The second question from Jasmine Ramirez over at KOLD News 13-- are COVID patients allowed to have visitors? And if so, what precautions are being taken?

At this time, Banner Health is having visitors for patients who are COVID positive or COVID suspected. We have information about that on our website. Of course, we want everybody to be safe. So if you're visiting our hospitals, please do not come if you are ill. If you're coming to visit a COVID-positive or COVID-suspected patient, there are limitations of the number of visitors and the hours in which you can visit.

You will be instructed when you arrive outside that room by staff of how to protect yourself. We will ask you to be making sure that you have an appropriate mask on, as well as other protective gear, so that you can remain safe. We will do that for each and every person who visits a COVID patient or a COVID-suspected patient.

Howard Fischer from Capitol Media Services asks, so, if COVID patients are only a third or so of patients, the capacity-- as high as it was in COVID peak-- what is filling up those beds?

So it's non-COVID care. So as you probably have read about and many of you have written about, we know that individuals, throughout the pandemic, have-- very unfortunately-- because of the scenario that we have been experiencing, delaying care. Some of them delayed preventative care. Some of them are presenting after having symptoms for a protracted period of time and presenting late in the course of their disease or illness.

Those non-COVID patients are what makes up the rest of our inpatient occupancy. And this, in combination with our COVID patients, is what is creating the largest load of inpatient census that we have had since the beginning of the pandemic.

Brahm Resnik from 12 News here in Phoenix asks can you describe what a workday is like for a frontline health care worker in your hospitals and the stresses they now face?

So it's hard to describe that in a short answer, but many of you have read and written about this. Banner Health's experience and the experience of our frontline health care heroes is very similar to that that is occurring across this entire country. They have been under a lot of strain and a lot of stress due to the pandemic. They wear a lot of PPE-- personal protective gear-- to protect themselves during this pandemic. And they are tired. Many of them, as I've already spoken about in my opening comments, have decided to leave the profession of health care, retire early, or go to a non-bedside role.

So let's all make sure that we remember to thank them for their incredible dedication, their incredible experience and for being there for all of us if we need them.

Barbara Villa from Arizona News Radio asks, what does the pace of pediatric vaccinations look like? Are there any signs of that slowing down?

I'll refer you to other resources for that. Many of our pediatric patients are receiving their vaccine outside of Banner Health, and Banner Health is providing pediatric vaccines within our clinics. I will have to refer you to some other sources for that as we are not tracking that at the community or the state level.

Nick Phillips with *Arizona Capitol Times* asks, are Banner hospitals at or near patient levels that would necessitate triage? If so, can you describe what that looks like?

So we are not. As I indicated previously, we are currently operating in the state of Arizona at contingency level of care. If we get worse, we may, then, need to go over to crisis standards level of care. Crisis standards level of care does not necessarily mean that we will be triaging. That is a subcomponent of that. If we have to triage, it would mean things like delaying additional care, prioritizing who has bed availability, and things such as that. We do not want to get there. You do not want us to get there.

So I'm going to ask everybody, please do your part so we can maintain our health care system for both COVID and non-COVID patients. This is what you need to do-- get vaccinated if you're unvaccinated, get a COVID booster if you have not yet received it and are eligible, and, please, do mask up when you're in those indoor settings where there are a lot of people around you.