

Dr. Marjorie Bessel Press Conference

12/14/21

Good morning.

Hospital volumes in several Banner markets outside of Arizona have declined in recent weeks. For this reason, my remarks today will focus on Arizona where we continue to experience concerning hospitalization trends.

As you have seen on the Arizona Department of Health Services COVID dashboard, hospitals continue to experience an increase in hospitalizations, ICU admissions and ventilator usage.

Inpatient volumes are at their highest levels since the start of the pandemic, with several Banner hospitals operating above 100% capacity. Very few ICU beds remain available statewide. While COVID patients account for a smaller percentage of patients than prior surges, our hospital staffing situation has also changed. We are more stretched now than we have been since the start of the pandemic.

Many of you have read and written stories about the national shortage of health care workers. We are experiencing the impact of this shortage in our hospitals with many core team members who decided to retire, exit the health care industry or transition to non-bedside roles because of prior surges and the enormous physical and mental impact the pandemic has had on them.

Banner currently has more than 2,600 travel workers on-site to augment our core staff. We have continued to recruit, upskill, redeploy and stretch as much as possible, but if the forecasted trends continue, we will soon be unable to meet the health care demands of Arizonans.

Banner's predictive modeling tools show no signs of letting up. We expect that volumes will continue to increase throughout December and into the beginning of next year before peaking around the middle of January. Our current forecast does not account for the Omicron variant.

As I mentioned earlier, ICUs are where we are experiencing the most significant strain on our resources. Currently, COVID patients account for 36% of our ICU patients. 88% of those COVID ICU patients are unvaccinated. Half of our patients on ventilators are COVID positive.

Emergency rooms remain very busy, with visits for COVID-like illness increasing daily. To reduce the strain on emergency rooms for non-life-threatening illnesses and injuries, we have made a change in our primary care clinics to prioritize sick visits for established patients. As a result, patients may experience an increased wait for non-urgent PCP appointments that can safely be delayed, such as routine follow-ups, well visits and new patient visits.

Banner continues to perform scheduled, medically necessary surgeries and procedures at our hospitals and ambulatory surgery centers. The decisions to schedule and proceed with these are handled at the facility level where they closely evaluate surgical needs, availability of resources and hospital capacity. Our goal is to meet the health care needs of our community by caring for both COVID and non-COVID patients.

Most all scheduled, medically necessary surgeries do not require ICU stays and many can be performed on an outpatient basis with no hospitalization. For those that do require ICU-level care, we have experienced postponements because of the COVID surge and strain on our ICUs. Additional postponements may be necessary as inpatient bed availability decreases.

As a reminder, it is not our desire to delay care. Surgeries that are performed at Banner hospitals are medically necessary procedures. They include things like a mastectomy for breast cancer, gallbladder removal for stones and a hip replacement for pain. Scheduled, medically necessary surgeries are planned at least 24 hours into the future and are done in a safe, controlled, non-emergency setting. If significantly postponed, they might become emergency surgeries. Emergency surgeries often have a longer recovery and worse outcomes, which can require hospitalization and ICU-level care.

My top ask of the community at this time is for all who are eligible to get vaccinated and receive your boosters if you have not yet done so. This is the best way to prevent serious COVID

illness that requires hospital-level care. In addition, please mask when you are indoors and stay home when you are ill. Get tested as soon as possible if you experience COVID symptoms, and if you test positive, ask your doctor if you qualify for monoclonal antibody treatment.

One additional ask is to utilize appropriate levels of care for your illnesses and injuries. Please go to an emergency room for life-threatening health issues like stroke, heart attack, severe bleeding, severe breathing problems and other serious issues that require immediate treatment. If not an emergency, consider alternatives like urgent care, primary care and virtual visits to address your medical needs. Banner has a symptom checker on its website to help you decide what level of care you might need as well as a blog that provides step-by-step guidance on selecting an appropriate level of care.

Thank you.