

Dr. Marjorie Bessel Press Conference

Dec. 28, 2021

Good morning.

Hospital volumes in several Banner markets outside of Arizona have not been over capacity for the past weeks. So, my remarks today primarily will focus on Arizona, where we continue to experience high hospital volumes with COVID and non-COVID patients.

I want to give special thanks to all the frontline health care workers who sacrificed their holiday celebrations to be there for our very sick patients who needed them. As you know, our clinical staff is stretched thin and they are exhausted...but, they continue to provide excellent care day after day through this latest COVID pandemic surge.

The Arizona Department of Health Services COVID dashboard reflects high hospitalizations, ICU admissions and ventilator usage across Arizona. Inpatient volumes remain at high levels, with some Banner hospitals operating above 100% capacity.

Our predictive modeling tools still show no signs of this surge letting up. We expect that volumes will continue to increase through the beginning of next year before peaking around the middle of January.

It's important to note, however, that the Omicron variant can have an impact on our forecast. Banner is implementing changes to its COVID management strategy in response to the prevalence of the Omicron variant in the markets we serve.

There are several manufacturers of the Monoclonal Antibodies we have been using. They have reduced efficacy against the omicron variant. A different monoclonal antibody, Sotrovimab, is efficacious, but there is no supply of Sotrovimab in Banner Health facilities at this time.

Effective today, December 28, 2021, we are pausing our administration of monoclonal antibodies until Sotrovimab is available. We expect to receive a Sotrovimab supply during the week of January 3rd. We anticipate initial supplies to be extremely limited. Now is a good time to get vaccinated or boosted if you have not done so.

Also, effective today a new oral antiviral medication is available and can be prescribed by your physician. Initial supplies are extremely limited; hence medication will be used for patients who are at highest risk and meet strict criteria. Our Banner health physicians and other providers can assist you in being evaluated for this medication if you test positive.

- Omicron will likely displace Delta in January in the U.S.
- Omicron can -- and is -- infecting those with previous COVID infection
- Omicron is resulting in higher vaccine breakthrough infections, **particularly in those who have not received a booster!**
- Omicron appears to be much more transmissible than previous variants, including Delta
- Early evidence suggests Omicron may produce less severe disease; however, degree of impact is unknown.
- Even if a very small percentage require hospitalization, the increased transmissibility and immune escape could lead to very high hospitalization rates

There was a lot of coverage yesterday about CDC changes for isolation and quarantine practices for individuals who test positive for COVID. CDC also last week changed its guidelines for healthcare workers who

are positive for COVID or exposed to COVID which now allows for shortened periods of time off work. Banner Health is adopting those guidelines into our return to work processes. It's important to note that CDC often has criteria for the healthcare industry that is different than that for the general public. In hospitals and care settings, healthcare workers are always masked to protect themselves and the patients receiving care.

We MUST do everything possible to mitigate Omicron – and COVID overall -- as soon as possible. That means – GET FULLY VACCINATED, if you haven't; GET BOOSTED, if you haven't; WEAR A MASK when in public indoor spaces; STAY HOME IF YOU'RE feeling sick, such as experiencing cold and flu symptoms. Get tested if you have symptoms that could be indicative of a COVID infection. Seek medical care if you experience a high fever, shortness of breath or other life-threatening symptoms.

As I have mentioned before, ICUs are where we are experiencing the most significant strain on our resources. Currently, COVID patients account for 40% of our ICU patients. Nearly 90 percent 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, our primary care clinics are prioritizing sick visits for established patients. As a result, patients may experience an increased wait for non-urgent PCP appointments that can safely be delayed.

Banner continues to perform scheduled, medically necessary surgeries at our hospitals and ambulatory surgery centers on a case-by-case basis. Decisions to schedule and proceed with such cases are handled

and decided at individual hospitals, 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.

Since ICU occupancy is critical, we have had hospitals pause cases that would require an ICU stay. If inpatient bed availability decreases, there may be more postponements and delays of non-emergency cases.

Surgeries performed at Banner hospitals are medically necessary procedures. It is not business as usual to delay or postpone these surgeries. Doing so can put patients at risk to become sicker and procedures to become emergency surgeries. Emergency surgeries often have a longer recovery and worse outcomes, which can require hospitalization and ICU-level care.

AGAIN, 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. Masking is also highly recommended when you are indoors. 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. Soon there will be oral anti-viral medication to treat COVID patients. Banner doctors will begin prescribing these medications as soon as they become available for those patients who meet criteria.

We also continue to ask the public to use appropriate levels of care for 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 it's 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.