

Banner Health | 8-10 Press Conference transcript_2

Bennito Kely with the *TucsonSentinel* asks, could you please follow up with the number of pediatric cases in the ICU and on ventilators?

We will go look at those numbers and follow up.

Alisa Reznick with the Arizona Public Media asks two questions. So I will ask you the first question, Dr. Bessel. How many people who are hospitalized in ICU or other currently are vaccinated?

I'm going to repeat the answer that I stated previously, which is that we are still working on getting accurate data for that. But our experience so far appears to be very similar to what the experience is across the country. The vast majority of individuals who are being hospitalized or requiring ICU care are amongst the unvaccinated. We continue to experience that here at Banner Health. And when we have highly accurate data that we're confident about, we will absolutely share it.

You might have already answered this question, but I will ask it again. With this current highly infectious variant, are you seeing more serious cases among those who are already vaccinated? And that's the second question asked by Alisa Reznick with Arizona Public Media.

So we are not. So, again, our experience so far is very similar to what's being reported across the country, that for those individuals that are vaccinated and are having breakthrough infections, they are having a much milder illness than those that are unvaccinated and becoming infected with the Delta variant.

Again, the vaccines were made to protect you from death and serious illness. And they are doing an excellent job of that. Those that are vaccinated may still experience a breakthrough infection with Delta, but that infection and those symptoms are going to be much milder than if you are unvaccinated.

Nicole Garcia with Fox 10 News here in Phoenix asks, are you anticipating some Banner employees may resign or be fired for not being vaccinated after the deadline?

So our intent is to make sure that our work environment and our care delivery for patients that need us is as safe as possible. And as I answered on a previous question, that has been the rationale for the mandatory vaccination. It is also our intent for all of our team members currently employed by Banner to stay with Banner.

We are working with individuals to explain to them our rationale and to encourage them if they are not yet vaccinated to get vaccinated. It is our absolute desire as we get to our November 1 deadline to have every single team member continue this journey with us as we make ourselves a safe place for care and make ourselves available to all of you who may need our care, whether it's for COVID or non-COVID reasons.

Mark Phillips with ABC 15 here in Phoenix asks, is Banner considering suspending some or all of its elective surgeries?

So our desire is to make sure that we're serving the community. And that includes COVID patients as well as non-COVID patients. At this time, we are not suspending any elective surgeries. And it is our desire to hopefully not have to do that again. We know that those of you that are out there that need a surgery are counting on us to make sure that we can get the surgery that you need.

We will continue to update you as this surge continues to unfold. And if we change the direction or have to make a different decision, we will certainly communicate that to everyone-- our surgeons, our patients, our staff, and those families.

Liliana Salgado with Univision Arizona here in Phoenix asks, you mentioned that last year during the surge, you reached 484 ICU patients. You just clarified that 90 of the current 435 ICU patients were COVID. Do you know how many were COVID patients during the peak you mentioned?

I don't, but the percentage was much higher. We can go ahead and get that exact statistic for you.

Nicole Garcia with Fox 10 News here in Phoenix asks, does it appear that COVID patients in the hospital right now have more severe symptoms during this surge versus previous surges?

I can't really answer that question at the level of detail that I think the question is asking for. What I will say is that these patients who are, again, the vast majority are unvaccinated that are in our ICUs are still very, very ill. Many of them are requiring ventilatory support. Some of them are also requiring ECMO support. So again, my message to all of you that are listening out there is if you are unvaccinated, please go get vaccinated. Protect yourself from death and hospitalization with this very, very transmissible Delta variant.

Bennito Kelty from *Tucson Sentinel* asks, how close is Banner Health to getting all its employees vaccinated since it required all employees to be vaccinated?

So we still have a ways to go. I will bring those statistics forward in future press conferences, but we still have a large number of individuals that are either in the process of getting vaccinated or submitting their vaccine card to us. Again, as we've communicated out there, our deadline for that is November 1.

Howard Fischer with Capitol Media Services here in Arizona asks, why are you avoiding taking a position on mandatory masks in schools when you say children should be masked?

So my position is that children should be masked in schools. And the way that we get to that is something that I will leave to others. I'm coming from a clinical perspective that children should be masked in school consistent with CDC guidelines, as well as support from other pediatric societies.

Stephanie Innes from *The Arizona Republic* asks two questions, so I will read the first. What has been the general reaction within Banner Health to the requirement that staff members should be vaccinated by November 1?

So we have received a number of sentiments from our team members out there. The overwhelming majority of those sentiments have been positive. For those that have concerns around our mandatory COVID vaccination process, we are working individually with those team members as well as with their leaders to continue to explain the rationale, make sure that we're here to provide answers to any questions that they may have, as well as to support them through the vaccine process that we have in place.

And the second part to Stephanie's question, do you anticipate having employees quit over this requirement?

So it's absolutely not our desire to have that be an outcome. We have had in the past mandatory influenza vaccination. And our experience with that is that there are very few team members that ultimately quit over an influenza mandatory vaccination.

While we understand that the COVID vaccine is new, we all are in this together with the pandemic. And so it is again our desire to not have that occur. We continue to work with all of our team members, continue to explain our rationale, and hope that every single team member who's currently employed with Banner will continue along that journey with us.

Terry Tang with the *Associated Press* in Arizona. Can you quantify the staffing or nursing shortage at Banner? What is the ideal number of permanent and contract staff Banner would like to have? And about how many do you currently have?

So I'll answer that in the best way that I can with statistics that I have available to me today. So just as a reminder to all of us, Banner always brings in external contracted labor or travel nurses every winter season. We experience a surge due to respiratory pathogens like influenza. And we always augment our staff during those difficult winter months. So this planning is not different from prior years. But the magnitude of what we're likely going to need due to the COVID surge, of course, is significant and concerning at this time.

To put a couple of numbers into perspective, we currently have-- and this was shared with media, I believe, yesterday-- the following nursing shortage numbers. We have 1,057 bedside RN vacancies and 327 nursing support role vacancies. Obviously, in a ideal world, those numbers would be much smaller, but we will continue to hire and ask anybody who's interested, again, to go to bannerhealth.com/careers. And we will continue to supplement with external contract labor as needed.

Nicole Garcia with Fox 10 News here in Phoenix asks, the Arizona Department of Health Services website indicates under 200 ICU beds are currently available statewide. How many ICU beds are open at Banner hospitals? And what is the current capacity of ICU beds?

I do not have those numbers with me. We will follow up with you afterwards. Banner Health does participate in submitting to Arizona Department of Health Services, as required, those numbers. And we can go ahead and grab those for you and get those to you after the press conference. Thank you.

Alisa Reznick with Arizona Public Media asks two questions. I'll ask the first. What is the average amount of time people are spending in the ICU in Arizona?

So the average amount of time that COVID patients are spending in the ICU in Arizona continues to be approximately the same as last surge. Most of those patients spend more than a week with us in the intensive care unit and also have a multi-week total hospitalization. So for individuals who get COVID that require that level of care, they will be in our hospitals for quite a bit of time as they both receive intensive care as well as then recover before they're able to go and be discharged from hospitals.

Again, in order to avoid that, I ask everybody out there who's not yet vaccinated, please get yourself vaccinated to avoid being infected with this highly transmissible Delta variant and avoid coming into our hospitals with this terrible COVID-19 disease.

And the second part of that question from Alisa Reznick with Arizona Public Media, is there a concern of capacity issues at this time?

So at this time, we are operating without capacity constraints, but I will say that with the surge that we're beginning to experience and we've been reporting out here through the media, we are concerned if that trajectory continues. We're asking all of you to help with us.

We are doing our part. We've talked about the number of nurses that we're bringing in as an example for traveling nurse supplementation to our staffing, but we need your help. If you're unvaccinated, please get yourself vaccinated. This Delta variant is highly transmissible. And vaccines remain especially effective at preventing death as well as serious illness requiring hospitalization.

Liliana Salgado with Univision here in Phoenix asks, Valleywise Hospital announced last week that they had to open a second COVID unit. Has Banner needed to open more spaces that were already unused for COVID?

We have had to dedicate some of our space for COVID only. This is something that we did in prior surges. It's also something that we do to make sure that we're cohorting these individuals who have a highly contagious disease. So we do have COVID units already open. And we'll continue to open more of those as the COVID surge continues to make sure that we're meeting the needs of our community.