

The next question comes from Garrett Archer with ABC 15 here in Phoenix. As you said, we are in a long and sustained plateau of COVID hospitalizations. Arizona Department of Health Services bed counts are now often near record levels reported during the winter surge. Has Banner suspended elective surgeries, and do you anticipate a staffing issue?

So first of all, I'd just like to say that, while we've been experiencing a plateau for the last two and a half weeks, I would not say that, from a health care delivery system, we would say that that is a long plateau. That is actually a fairly short plateau, and we know that volumes, based on all of our forecasting models, are almost assuredly going to increase in the upcoming months of fall and winter. Staffing, as I've stated in some of my previous answers to questions, will remain our top priority. And I've stated a couple of times the number of core positions that we're recruiting for and the number of external contracted labor positions for both nursing and respiratory therapists that we are still looking for.

We manage hospitals every day. This is what we do. We constantly adjust and tweak and manage the patient flow and our staffing models to meet the needs of the community. We remain very, very busy at this time. I'd also like to comment on elective surgeries. And as we've stated before in some of our prior press conferences during previous surges, the term elective surgery can be a misnomer.

These patients who need surgery are not coming to us for plastic surgery, facelifts or things like that, of a non-essential mean. Elective surgeries that are being done in our hospitals and our ambulatory surgery centers are needed, necessary, medically required surgeries for patients that have cancer, pain, or other ailments that require these surgical interventions. So yes, we do adjust our surgical planning, sometimes on a day by day basis, to make sure that we are here to meet the needs of both COVID, non-COVID and surgical patients. Hospitals have had to postpone or curtail surgical patients while we've been experiencing the exponential growth that we have, and even while we are in this plateau.

I would ask all of you out there, help us. Get yourself vaccinated. Wear a mask when you're indoors so that we can be here for everybody who needs us, including patients that have medically necessary surgeries already on the books for us in the upcoming weeks and months.

Cole Lauterbach with the Center Square is asking a question in reference to a study in the Atlantic. So I'm going to read you the question, Dr. Bessel. A study featured in the Atlantic suggests that roughly half of all the hospitalized patients showing up on COVID data dashboards in 2021 may have been admitted for another reason entirely or had only a mild presentation of the disease. They studied VAs. Has Banner seen an uptick in non-serious COVID-19 hospitalizations?

So I have not seen that article, so my comments will be specific to Banner's experience in relation to COVID hospitalizations. So at Banner Health, we are not admitting patients with COVID who do not meet criteria for requiring hospitalization. Patients that are being hospitalized at Banner Health across our entire system for a COVID diagnosis are seriously ill. They may require things like additional oxygen that cannot be provided at home, additional monitoring of their hemodynamic status, or significant concern that they're going to deteriorate and need more intensive therapy from us. They may be requiring different types of treatments that are available only in an inpatient hospital setting.

Banner Health is not admitting patients with COVID who have mild disease, who do not need inpatient care. We are not utilizing our resources for those types of patients, and we are discharging those patients through our emergency department if they do not meet inpatient criteria. In addition to that, Banner Health is testing patients who come in for other reasons for COVID, and it is a relatively small number of patients being admitted for a non-COVID reason that end up testing positive for COVID.

Next question comes from Paul Ingram from the Tucson Sentinel. Paul asks, how many children are in pediatric care at Banner hospitals, and is that number rising or falling?

So at this time, the pediatric inpatients that are within a Banner hospital remain steady, and we are not experiencing any exponential growth. I would remind us of the comments that I've stated previously about pediatric patients requiring hospitalization at Banner. At this time, most of those patients are not requiring ICU care. Most of them are on a medical surgical level of care. In addition to that, the average length of stay for those patients is relatively short, at four days.

Jay Vo with Wittmann News asks, can you provide a rough estimate of how many Banner staff may have left because of the vaccine mandate?

I do not have those numbers with me here today. And as I stated to a previous question, our deadline for mandatory vaccination is November 1st. I would expect shortly after that that we would be able to provide our numbers in regard to that question of how many individuals have chosen to leave Banner Health due to our mandatory vaccination requirement. I will also state that we have been in direct contact with other health care systems outside the state of Arizona, who've already gone past their mandatory vaccination deadline.

As I've stated previously, it's Banner Health's intent to have every single team member come along with us and stay employed with us as we get to that November 1st deadline. We were happy to receive news from some of those other health care systems that it is a relatively small percentage of individuals that have left other health care systems once the deadline for mandatory vaccination has passed. It is our sincere desire for that to be the case here for Banner Health, and for all of our team members to come along with us and stay with us as we approach and get through our November 1st deadline.

Jay Vo with the Wittmann News asks another question. How is Banner Health responding with COVID-19 in rural communities in Maricopa County?

I'm not sure I exactly understand the intent of that question, but I will respond with a couple of comments. Banner Health has a number of different hospitals that are in rural communities, both in the state of Arizona, as well as outside of the state of Arizona. Banner Health continues to support all of our Banner Health rural facilities in a way that helps them best meet the needs of their community. In addition to that, Banner Health is participating in Arizona with the COVID surge line, and continues to receive transfers through that mechanism. And we are doing our absolute best to meet the needs of those patients that require hospitalization at a Banner hospital.

Nicholas Gerbis with KJZZ News here in Phoenix asks, you have referred to mu as a variant of concern at the World Health Organization. To clarify, do you mean a variant of interest, or has its status changed?

Thank you for that clarification. It is a variant of interest with the WHO at this time.

Brian Brennan with KGUN 9 in Tucson asks, what are proven and effective uses for ivermectin in humans?

So I'm going to go back to some of my comments to make sure that my overarching message around ivermectin is well received. Ivermectin is not an FDA-approved treatment for COVID. Clinical trials are ongoing to assess the effectiveness of ivermectin for COVID, but at this time, there are no clear findings that have been released that confirm that this drug is safe or an effective form of treatment or prophylaxis for COVID. For this reason, it is not a drug that Banner Health will be prescribing for treatment of COVID.

Ivermectin does have human indications for parasitic type of infections. Ivermectin also, in different types of doses, has indication for treatment of livestock. For all of these reasons, and as I stated in some of my safety comments in regards to what our Poison Center has received for phone calls, we strongly recommend against any individual out there going and purchasing ivermectin from stores that have that on sale for livestock. The dosage of that can be very detrimental to your health. If you are concerned about COVID, please contact your primary care provider. And if you have not yet been vaccinated, please protect yourself, your friends, and your family around you by getting vaccinated.