

Banner Health | 9-8 Press Conference Transcript_1

Thank you, Dr. Bessel. At this time, I will read questions submitted by the reporters in attendance so that Dr. Bessel can answer them. And again, as a reminder to reporters, if you have a question, please include your name, your media outlet affiliation, and please write your question as if you're asking it in person.

Our first question, Dr. Bessel, comes from Liliana Salgado from Univision Arizona here in Phoenix. What's the update on new hires? How many nurse positions do you need to fill?

We continue to have many positions that are open for core nursing staff, as well as bringing in external contracted labor. We bring in a number of nurses each and every week, along with respiratory therapists that get oriented to our Banner Health system and begin to help us out there on the floors.

Liliana Salgado, again from Univision here in Phoenix asks two questions. So I'll ask the first. Are pediatric COVID hospitalizations increasing?

Let me just go back to my opening remarks.

So I want to go back to our opening remarks and speak specifically about RSV. So RSV hospitalizations and emergency room visits at Banner have increased over the past three weeks, with a significant increase over the last four days. As a reminder, that is an unseasonable spike.

Typically, RSV is not a big concern during the summer months. As far as COVID, we are seeing some similar trends as we are in the adult population with some stabilization of those numbers.

The second part two of that question from Liliana Salgado-- and again, I'll ask the first question, which you just answered-- are pediatric COVID hospitalizations increasing? The second part of that question-- how do today's stats compare to the previous months?

Thank you for that. So our numbers that we are experiencing here today are an increase over previous months. So as I stated in my opening remarks, while we are happy to see a stabilization, or a plateauing of our hospitalizations across most of our markets, we are still very busy. We are also very busy in our intensive care units, where 55% of our patients are COVID positive. Our numbers here for today, show that we are caring for 522 ICU patients. As an example, our peak ICU occupancy during the 2020 summer surge was 484.

Next question comes from Bud Foster at KOLD TV in Tucson. We continue to see reports that one in four new cases are children. Can you confirm that or validate that is the case?

So thank you for that question. I believe the statistic that you are referring to includes all diagnoses of COVID, which are the ambulatory testing inclusive. What I have been sharing here with you in regards to Banner's experience with pediatric patients making up about 5% of our hospitalizations is for inpatient care. So I cannot speak to the ambulatory testing today. We'll have to follow up and see if we can get that information from another source for you.

Colleen Sikora from 12 News here in Phoenix asks, since the pandemic began, at least 378 law enforcement officers nationwide have died from COVID. That's at least twice more than other line-of-duty deaths, like shootings. As a health professional, what would your advice be to public safety officers considering the vaccine?

Thank you. And so first of all, thank you to all of you who provide those services to keep all of us safe. We're certainly very thankful for that. And of course, it's a tragedy for any death to occur. But the number that you quoted is especially disheartening.

For anybody who is facing in the public, of course, there are several things that can be done to help protect you while you were doing your job to help protect us. And so that includes getting vaccinated, if you are able and do not have a medical contraindication to that, as well as making sure that you are masking when you're in high risk situations, being close to the public or being in indoor settings. The other thing that we can all do, and have said this multiple times over my press conferences is to not go to school or to work when you're ill. If you are ill, please stay home. If your symptoms could be consistent with COVID, please go ahead and get tested.

Bud Foster from KOLD TV in Tucson asks, have you seen cases from any new variants? And if so, what are they and how widespread?

So at Banner Health, when we do testing, our testing is reported back as a COVID positive test or a COVID negative test. The typing or the sequencing of those viruses is done by other entities outside of Banner Health. And I would refer you to some of those organizations. We can provide you a link so that you can see perhaps, in the state of Arizona, what the variants are and what percentage they make up across our communities.

Stephanie Innes from the *Arizona Republic* asks two questions. So I will ask you the first. You said the average age of pediatric COVID patients hospitalized in Banner hospitals in August was eight years old. Do you know how many pediatric patients were hospitalized in Banner hospitals in August?

I do not have those numbers with me today. But we can go ahead and follow up and get that for you.

OK. And the second part of that question. I'm not sure if you'll be able to answer it. She asks, we are talking all Banner hospitals-- are we talking all Banner hospitals or just Banner hospitals in Arizona?

Those numbers that I spoke about in my opening remarks are for Banner Health across the markets.

Next question comes from Nicole Garcia with Fox 10 here in Phoenix. She asks two questions. I'll read the first. What are the differences between symptoms of COVID and RSV in children?

Yeah, and those are difficult questions sometimes. And it's sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other. I would recommend that anybody who has a child who might be having any type of respiratory symptoms to please contact your care provider and get direction of care from them. Also, you can visit our urgent care site if there's one close to you at your home who can help you get appropriate testing and evaluation.

Second part of that question from Nicole Garcia at Fox 10 here in Phoenix. What do you think is behind this unseasonable increase in RSV?

Yeah, I don't know that all of us know the answer to that question. But certainly, we know a couple of things. We know that respiratory-type viruses and illnesses often circulate when we are together, when we are indoors, when we have our masks off. And so certainly as we have begun to emerge out of some of the behaviors that we put into place during COVID, such as starting to congregate, such as starting to be together indoors, such as taking masks off, that we might see a rise in viral illnesses.

It is unseasonable to see RSV this early. But it also reminds us that we have influenza season ahead of us. So for those of you that were listening and are listening at this time, remind you to please, if you're not yet vaccinated for COVID, go ahead and get that done as soon as possible. And also, that it's time to start getting vaccinated for flu. It's recommended that we get our flu shots in September and October to get optimal coverage.

Lindsay Walker from the Independent News media here in Phoenix asks, Arizona has one of the highest COVID-19 fatality rates in the country with a rate of 21% for every 100,000 people. Does that correlate with what Banner hospitals are seeing?

I'm not really sure exactly what the question is. But I will answer it in this way. Banner Health continues to take excellent care of both COVID and non-COVID patients. Our mortality rates that we are experiencing for those patients that are hospitalized with COVID are in alignment with what the mortality rate of other hospitalized patients are across the country.

One caveat that we all have to take a look at when we are trying to compare mortality rates from one part of the country to the other is making sure that we understand the nuances of when the peak was, because we know that death from COVID is more of a lagging indicator, versus percent positivity and hospitalization rates. We certainly mourn every single individual who has died from COVID and wish all of you would go out there and get vaccinated. If you're not yet vaccinated against COVID, do so to protect yourself, as well as those that are around you.

Nicole Garcia from Fox 10 would like to know, how many COVID pediatric patients we are currently treating and how many RSV pediatric patients we are currently treating?

I do not have those statistics with me here today. We can go ahead and follow up afterwards. I would also recommend that for statistics like that, reminder that Banner Health is currently taking care of 44% of Arizona COVID positive or COVID suspected patients in the state. And what you see on the Arizona Department of Health Services dashboard will be very reflective of the trends that Banner Health is seeing.

Stephanie Innes from the *Arizona Republic* asks, we've seen reports of breakthrough COVID infections in the news in recent weeks and in Arizona. They currently account for about 14% to 15% of all positive cases. Should the public be using this information as a way to argue that vaccines are not effective?

Actually, I think that information is the exact opposite of that. And so what we know is that our COVID vaccines that we have available here in the United States are doing an excellent job. They remain safe. And they remain very efficacious of what they originally intended to do, which is to prevent death and hospitalization.

Breakthrough cases are going to happen. They will continue to happen. However, what we are seeing is that there are very small number of individuals who have a breakthrough case, who require hospitalization, which means the vaccine is working. So if you would like to avoid getting sick from COVID and requiring hospitalization or potentially even dying from this terrible disease, please get vaccinated now. In addition to that, influenza season is also upcoming. And it's time for us to get our flu shots. Please get vaccinated for influenza during the month of September and October to get optimal coverage for yourself.