

October 20, 2021, Briefing Transcript

Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, president of UT Southwestern Medical Center, and I welcome those of you joining us this morning to our 48th campus briefing since the start of the pandemic. And as in my past briefings, I'll begin with an update on COVID-19 here in the region, and certainly impact on our UT Southwestern community.

Having had the opportunity to review the latest update from our modeling group earlier this morning, and an update you'll be able to see for yourself when it's posted later today, I'm pleased to report that we continue to see encouraging trends across the region, with declining numbers of patients requiring hospitalization, declining numbers of new infections, and rates of test positivity. Importantly, the RT value, which we've come to know over these many months as predicting whether the number of cases of COVID will increase or decrease is now well below one in both Dallas and Tarrant County, and that I'm sure everybody listening will appreciate means that we can anticipate continued decline in the number of new cases of COVID-19.

There is a slight qualification on that, as the latest update shows the rate of decline is itself slowing a bit, but nonetheless, the trends are certainly heading in an encouraging direction. And that is reflected here on the campus in terms of number of patients we're caring for at Clements University Hospital and at Parkland. At Clements University Hospital, our census of COVID patients has been now in the twenties, really the low twenties, the past number of days. That's off of a peak in this surge just north of 70. And at Parkland, as of yesterday, the number of patients being cared for there with COVID was in the high fifties, off of a peak of approximately 120 or 130 in this surge. So all of that's certainly reflective of the encouraging trends that we've seen across the region.

Consistent with that, the number of our UT Southwestern community who have been diagnosed with COVID has continued to decline in the two weeks since my last briefing. And with one exception, we've not seen on-campus transmission, either from one employee to another or from a patient to employee, in the last few weeks. All of these trends reflect the metrics, which our EOC has used to help guide us in their recommendations, and have headed from what was at the peak of this recent surge almost all in the red zone, now largely in the green and yellow zone. So clearly we are heading in a good direction, not only in the region, but on the campus.

With recognition of those trends, I am pleased to have accepted last week, or actually the week before, the recommendation to ease the limits on gathering size for outside activities at UT Southwestern. With the continuing progress since that time, I'm happy to announce with this briefing that we will also lift any limits on the size of meetings held inside on the campus, beginning next Monday.

I would still encourage anyone who is participating in a meeting to wear your mask. We know that offers an important degree of additional protection, even if you have been fully vaccinated, but we will leave to supervisors to determine whether planned meetings will be held in person, remain in a virtual environment, or take place in a hybrid setting. But we will certainly leave that discretion to allow any

meetings and groups that are mission related on the campus to proceed in person if that seems the preferred option for any given meeting.

I do want to remind you that all of this does depend on our continued compliance with the measures, which have helped get us to this point. That is mask wearing, as I've already touched on, but also for those who remain within our UT Southwest community who have not been vaccinated, I strongly encourage you to consider that measure, to protect both yourselves, those of your colleagues here on the campus, and those of your friends and loved ones at home.

I want to touch on a related issue that I'm understandably receiving questions on, and that is guidance on parties, given the upcoming holidays. Notwithstanding the decision to remove any limits on gathering size for meetings and programs related to our mission, given the increased risk that holiday parties bring, with people eating and drinking and unable to wear masks, I have accepted a recommendation from the EOC that once again this year we forego any UT Southwestern sponsored holiday parties, regardless of the size or ability to socially distance.

In anticipation of the natural question, I am making the distinction here between gatherings that are related to advancing our education, our research, and our clinical programs, and those which are social. And that's not to take away from the importance of our social interactions and what they do to help us maintain a cohesive and supportive culture here at UT Southwestern.

So I understand that this will be disappointing news for many. Certainly I will miss the opportunity to join colleagues from across the campus in holiday celebrations once again this year, but at the same time feel, as has been the case throughout the pandemic, that we do place safety as paramount in ultimate decisions about what seems sensible in our university operations, in the context that notwithstanding the encouraging trends which I've described this morning, the possibility of transmission of COVID-19 remains ever present still. And so I share this news as a balance between what I know we would all like to do and what we believe is prudent at this time.

In addition, given the positive trends, I do believe we have once again come to the threshold in which we can ask our EOC to stand down. I want to thank them once again for their remarkable service to our UT Southwestern community over this past year and a half. Particular thanks to doctors Will Daniel and Bruce Brown, who have led the EOC for that entire period, and really to make note that they have been a remarkable and an invaluable resource to the campus in guiding us through the ups and downs of this COVID-19 pandemic.

With that, I am going to turn to some non COVID related activities, and begin with a reminder that we are now well into our flu shot campaign for this coming winter. And I hope everybody will take advantage of the availability of the convenience in terms of options to get the vaccines on either the second floor of Clements University Hospital, in the education center, at the [inaudible 00:09:10] drive thru, and that'll be through October 29 on the north campus, and at our satellite clinics on October 14th, 21st and the 28th.

I think an important milestone event on the campus will take place on November 15th. On that day, we will have the groundbreaking ceremony for the new biomedical engineering and sciences building, which will be located on the east campus, as I've made note before. This new facility, which is being developed jointly with our colleagues from UT Dallas, will be the home of our newly established

Department of Biomedical Engineering. And I will take a note that our inaugural chair, Dr. Sam Achilefu, currently at WashU, will be joining us for that groundbreaking in anticipation of his arrival on the campus. And share also the happy news that Dr. Achilefu this week was elected to the National Academy of Medicine. So he arrives with that new distinction in this really important leadership role for our campus.

Moving to another important topic, as I mentioned at our last briefing, we are in the midst of our annual SEC campaign, in which I hope those of you with the means will stop to consider all of those in need once again this year, and consider contributing to one of the literally hundreds of vetted charities that are within the overall umbrella of our state employee charitable campaign. The campaign continues through the 30th, and I, again, encourage all of you with the means to consider helping those in what has continued to be of course a continuing challenge because of the pandemic, and even without the pandemic, many, many needs that we can help support.

I'd like to remind everybody, turning to another topic, that we are celebrating National Diversity Week. It began on Monday and will run through this Friday. It was founded in 1998 to raise awareness about the diversity which has shaped and continues to shape and enrich the United States. Our UT Southwestern Office of Institutional Equity and Access, division of diversity and inclusion, is utilizing this week to showcase our several business resource groups, or BRGs. Those include our veterans, our women and allies, our African American, our Asian Pacific Islander, Hispanic and Latino, and LGBT and allies BRG. They are really instrumental in creating a community, a sense of belonging, and provide opportunities for professional development through the resources provided to those membership groups.

Each day this week, a special program is being held to give you an insight into the many programmatic offerings and leadership development opportunities that our BRGs offer. So I would encourage those of you who have not had the opportunity to really become familiar with the BRGs to take up the opportunity this week to get that exposure, to see whether there are ways in which that will help you create your community within the community at UT Southwestern. These are occurring at noon to 1:00 PM each day, and as I say, continue through the week. So today, tomorrow, Thursday, and Friday. You can look at your My UT Southwestern internet page to learn more about those.

And before coming to a final couple of topics, we want to mention some positive developments, as our state legislature concluded its third special session this week. And to share the news that before the legislature concluded that session, they did approve a so-called tuition revenue bond bill. This is a program that funds capital, that is to say, building facility construction projects across institutions of higher education in Texas. And as that bill passed, it included nearly 60 million dollars to support further investment in the academic facilities at UT Southwestern. And as we finalize plans for how to deploy that to invest in our future, we'll be sharing that with you in future briefings.

Another important outcome of this last special session were the decisions that appropriated the American Rescue Plan dollars that the state received and making the decisions about how those dollars would be appropriated. They did include full funding for the construction of a psychiatric hospital here in Dallas. And with that, we will certainly advance our partnership with Health and Human Services Commission of Texas to complete the planning of that psychiatric hospital, which UT Southwestern will be given the responsibility to not only plan, but oversee construction and then operate on behalf of

HHSC. And I think clearly an incredibly important advance for our region in so far as we see the vast amount of unmet need for mental health services, behavioral health services here in our community.

Finally, I want to call to your attention that next Thursday, October 28th, at 4:00 PM, we will have our last of this year's 2021 presidential lecture series. Dr. Dani [inaudible 00:15:23] from the Department of Cell Biology will be giving her lecture, Cryo Electron Microscopy: Opening a Frosty Window into Cells. And I have no doubt that it will be treated to a fascinating, and I think quite a beautiful set of images that have provided insights into basic functions that underly so many important processes whose insights will get us to a better understanding of the underlying causes of a whole range of diseases. So please put that on your calendars. Notwithstanding our decision now to open up our campus to on-campus meetings of whatever size, this lecture nonetheless will remain in a virtual environment. So really accessible to anybody if you can get to a computer.

And with that, I'm going to conclude by saying that in consideration of the progress which I've summarized and our ability to really move ahead in our operations, we will also transition in terms of the cadence of these briefings, going from our biweekly to now a monthly sequence. So I look forward to sharing with you the updates in our November update. And with that, I'll turn to Jenny Doren, who's here once again to pose your questions.

Jenny Doren:

Good morning, Dr. Podolsky. This first question is about campus operations, I think an appropriate extension of your announcement about lifting the limit on meeting size. One of our learners asked if the class of 2021 from the School of Health Professions can expect to have an in-person graduation ceremony later this year.

Dr. Podolsky:

The short answer I'm happy to say is yes. Based on the endorsement of the EOC, as well as the support of our academic affairs leaderships, we are planning to host an in-person commencement celebration for the School of Health Profession graduates in December, as we did for our medical and graduate school students in May. This graduation ceremony, in contrast to those, will be held, excuse me, in keeping with those, will be held outdoors if the weather permits, with a limited number of guests.

However, since December is still a couple months away, the caveat is that we will follow any public health restrictions that are in place at the time, including implementing social distancing practice as necessary. Having said that, I certainly expect and look forward to congratulating our School of Health Profession graduates and handing them their degrees in December.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you for that. Turning now to our forecasting model, someone wrote questioning what role natural immunity plays in COVID-19 cases decreasing. The forecasting model states, "Admission levels are currently declining, which may be linked to increases in mask usage, quarantines, testing, and transitions to online learning during outbreaks." There's nothing in there about natural immunity. Why not?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, that may be an omission in the comment, but the impact of natural immunity from infection is incorporated into the model's analysis. So the modeling group, to provide some context, considers several factors and variables known to impact transmission, including active infection and hospitalization rates in the community, vaccination uptake, and an array of data on behavior, such as mask compliance, testing, and mobility. I would note, as anybody who has followed their updates will have seen, the team has been extremely accurate in projecting the near term future trajectory of the pandemic in our north Texas community.

Natural immune protection following recovery from COVID-19 infection is factored into the UT Southwestern modeling calculations. The currently available scientific data suggests that those who have recovered from a COVID-19 infection are highly protected from reinfection for the first three to six months after initial diagnosis, and this near term protection is accounted for in the UT Southwestern predictive modeling. The extended duration of natural immunity over a longer period, that is more than six months, is much more variable across the population and is impacted by factors such as the severity of the original infection, community transmission rates, as well as the prevalence of specific variants of concern, which may be more capable of partially escaping prior immune protection. So moderating that positive impact of, at least in the short term, of natural immunity.

And it's well documented to those with prior infections who are subsequently vaccinated receive additional robust immune and clinical protection from vaccination. However, having said all that, there is no accurate estimate of what percentage of those vaccinated had prior COVID-19 infection. And for this reason, longer term natural immunity is not a major factor in the models, given these current uncertainties in the current state of knowledge. Finally, the summative comment for the UT Southwestern forecast seeks to highlight major trends in the pandemic and emphasize the protective behaviors that we know have a positive effect in reducing transmission.

Jenny Doren:

Shifting from COVID-19, we know how important it is to promote a culture of health and professional wellbeing. Our next question talks about trainees and concerns that they may not have access to the same resources as employees. Can you explain what is available?

Dr. Podolsky:

So there are several benefits available, and to a degree for our learners, based on your primary site of employment. So for many of our residents and fellows, that is Parkland, because Parkland is the employer. Depending on status, they may qualify for Parkland's retirement program and childcare benefits. Any questions regarding benefits and eligibility should be directed, at least from those individuals, should be directed to the Parkland benefits office, whose number is 214-590-8330.

If a resident or student is paid by UT Southwestern, then they have benefits through UT Southwestern and access to the same services as all employees, including the employee assistance program, UT Living Well, and the same backup care benefits as our faculty and staff. Trainees also have access to the Resident Wellness and Counseling Center established by UT Southwestern, which provides behavioral health, academic preparation and optimization, and wellness services tailored specifically to the needs of residents and fellows. The graduate medical education wellness website offers resources, including

self-help and self-screening apps. Our graduate medical school and School of Health Professions trainees can take advantage also of the UT Southwestern Student Wellness and Counseling Center's personal counseling, psychotherapy, group therapy, and psychiatric services.

Finally, there's also the peers advocate, excuse me, peer advocates program for graduate and medical students who may want support from a peer confidentially, to help with both school and non-school related matters.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you. UT Southwestern's six year plan outlines a need for implicit bias and cultural competency training for all faculty who serve in a teaching or mentoring capacity. What is leadership's plan to ensure most or all faculty engage in such training?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, we are proud of the diverse academic culture at UT Southwestern because it promotes understanding and mutual respect and enhances our ability to really deliver on our mission. As an academic medical center, we take seriously our responsibility to recruit, retain, and develop faculty who represent the larger community that we serve. Under the direction of Dr. Quinn Capers, Associate Dean for Faculty Diversity, the Office of Faculty Diversity and Development, and the Office of Women's Careers, will soon conduct a Train the Trainer program to equip faculty in every department and center with the knowledge to lead bias mitigation workshops.

The objective is to have skilled workshop moderators in every department who can lead annual or bi-annual training. Department chairs and center directors will be encouraged to host recurring bias mitigation discussions and workshops for all faculty, inclusive of teaching and mentoring faculty. And I know that many departments have initiated programs such as diversity and inclusion rounds that address these important issues. The Train the Trainer program will start in January and no doubt will help advance our commitment that is a core value at UT Southwestern, to diversity, inclusion, and equity.

I would mention that in addition, the Office of Faculty Diversity and Development promotes diversity at UT Southwestern by providing technical assistance to faculty on submission of NIH minority supplement grants, providing one-on-one consultation and mentoring to junior faculty and women faculty on career planning, supporting leadership development programs for minority and female faculty, providing financial support to accomplished junior faculty in underrepresented groups, for research and for travel to scientific meeting. And most importantly, in the most general sense, ensuring that we maintain a welcoming and supportive climate for everyone, including minority and women faculty. There is more information available on our faculty diversity and development webpage.

Jenny Doren:

Closing with the ever popular topic of parking, and a question about whether there is any plan in the near future to address a perceived lack of parking on both Parkland and UT Southwestern campuses.

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I'll first note that when it comes to parking, I will happily defer to Parkland for its plans to address parking at Parkland Hospital, as important as that is. Speaking for UT Southwestern, I can say that parking spaces are monitored regularly at all UT Southwestern faculty, and adjustments are made to accommodate needs. It is an ongoing effort by our parking services team. And as anyone on the campus will note, looking at some of our capital construction projects over the recent years and those underway now, including a plan for accommodating parking is always incorporated into any of those projects. And so we are certainly committed to doing our best to ensure that parking remains affordable and available on the UT Southwestern campus.

And with that, I want to thank you, Jenny, for your questions. I wish you and your kids happy and safe Halloween coming up.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you very much.