

OUR VIEW

Democracy is alive in La Grande

They might not have received the solution they wanted, but the large group of people who showed up at last week's La Grande School Board meeting were participating in the best traditions of American democracy.

The large crowd was on hand to give testimony and protest Gov. Kate Brown's directive mandating all students wear masks inside Oregon schools this fall.

They filled Central Elementary School's gymnasium, and the school board listened to testimony from a sizable number of residents who are not in support of the governor's decision, which was made in the wake of rising COVID-19 cases throughout Oregon.

The individuals who delivered their opinions to the board did the right thing, and the board was quite correct to allow as many people as possible to speak.

The mask mandate, along with just about anything else connected to COVID-19, has become a politicized lightning rod, and it is no different on Main Street USA.

COVID-19 as a disease should never have become politicized. The polio epidemic wasn't turned into political fodder nor the breeding ground for countless conspiracy theories.

But the U.S. didn't have Facebook, Twitter or any other forms of social media when polio was raging across the nation and, whether we like it or not, COVID-19 has become politicized.

That means elected leaders from the lowest level all the way to the White House have a responsibility to listen to citizens who want to say their piece. If they do it in a peaceful, nonthreatening way, those residents are firmly within the bounds of the Constitution and have every right to do so.

The school board is caught in the middle. The district can't very well refuse the orders of the governor, yet there is probably no shortage of people on the board and elsewhere who wish there were more local control over such issues.

The school board meeting also showed clearly that a lot of people, including district officials, are concerned about the welfare of their children.

The political debate over COVID wasn't solved at the meeting, but what was evident is democracy is alive and well in La Grande.



LETTERS

Please reconsider vaccination before this gets worse

COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations, deaths are rising predominantly among non-vaccinated individuals. Many public institutions (for example, veterans affairs, and the state of California) are requiring all workers to be vaccinated. Eastern Oregon University will require students be vaccinated fall term.

Union County COVID case numbers have risen 1,700% since the end of June (one of the highest in the state), at a weekly average of 64 cases per 100,000 people (covidactnow.com). This is 17.4 cases per day locally. Our current vaccination rate of 41% (received at least one dose) is one of the lowest in the state.

Where is the voice of reason from our leaders and politicians? Where is the voice of the medical community with advice and education? The hospital's mission is to ensure access to high-quality health care in a safe environment. Should they not attempt to educate the folks of Union County of the benefits of vaccination? Should they not create a safe hospital environment by ensuring its workers are vaccinated?

Facts — such as 4 million people dead on the planet and 600,000 (and rapidly rising) in the U.S. — do not seem to reach people.

I worked many years as an internist caring for the people of this county, and they deserve better. I urge everyone to listen to the truth from recognized health authorities who have dedicated their lives to understanding these issues and employing that knowledge for your benefit.

Please reconsider vaccination before this gets worse.

Richard Minogue, M.D.
La Grande

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

I have to take exception to the letter written by Tom Herrmann in the July 27 edition of The Observer. I think a letter with misleading information about COVID-19 vaccination during a pandemic, especially when we are experiencing a significant local surge among the unvaccinated population of Eastern Oregon, has the potential to lead to a significant increase in severe illness and death in our community.

Herrmann touts the improved treatments and protocols that have led to the decreased risk of death from the virus, and that is true. However, the improved treatment will do nothing to help stop the pandemic. Only vaccination can do that.

As a retired emergency physician I can accurately state that there have been great advances in trauma care in

this country in the last few years, but I would not recommend driving your car into a brick wall at 60 mph to find out. We have made great strides in the treatment of stroke and heart attack with "clot buster drugs," but I would not recommend stopping your blood pressure medication because of that. It can't be any simpler, Professor: "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

We have to remember that the more than 600,000 people who have died in this country from COVID-19 are Americans. It should be our patriotic duty to get vaccinated and stop the needless illness and death of our fellow citizens. Stop the nonsense, get the vaccine.

Kenneth Chasteen
La Grande

EOU has responsibility to safeguard health of students, staff, La Grande

Tom Herrmann is a retired professor of physics at Eastern Oregon University. I was therefore surprised to read his decidedly unscientific letter regarding COVID-19 vaccination of students at EOU (The Observer, "EOU should reevaluate requiring vaccination," July 27, 2021).

He claimed: "There is no significant threat of death from COVID to healthy young people."

Not true. The CDC's Monthly Mortality and Morbidity Report showed 2.9 million cases in those younger than 24 between March 1 and Dec. 12, 2020, and 57% of these were in the college-age group. Among those for whom data on hospitalization and death was available, there was a 2.5% rate of hospitalization (30,229), a 0.8% rate of ICU admission (1,973), and a 0.1% mortality (death) rate (654). I would call 654 deaths a significant threat — wouldn't you?

He claimed: "Treatments have been developed that greatly reduce symptom severity and death."

Only partially true. Monoclonal antibody and convalescent serum therapies are not universally available. This is still a dangerous disease with a high death rate.

He claimed: "There is no benefit to vaccination after COVID infection."

Not true. While it is unclear how long a COVID infection grants you immunity, reinfection is known to happen. Vaccination is the surest route to long-lasting immunity, even if boosters are needed down the pike.

Regarding myocarditis: Cases are rare and there are no fatalities. There is a risk of 40 cases of myocarditis for every million second doses of mRNA vaccine in males aged 12-29. And no deaths. That same million doses will prevent 560 hospitalizations, 138 ICU admits and six deaths. (Most cases of myocarditis occurred among males).

Regarding vaccination and pregnancy: I know of no conclusive data on this issue. It would be reasonable (though not necessary) to delay vaccination if pregnant.

We do know that a 2021 study of college campuses that reopened to in-person learning showed infection peaks in their student bodies that immediately preceded and were apparently linked to infection peaks in their surrounding communities.

EOU and its administration have a responsibility to safeguard the health of its students and staff and the La Grande community at large. Failure to vaccinate the student body (and staff) clearly abdicates this responsibility.

David Moyal
La Grande

Remote court appearances enhance justice

As a criminal defense attorney in La Grande, I would like to offer a different perspective related to The Observer article entitled "Union County resumes in-person court hearings."

Courts should be accessible to all Oregonians, especially those who are working, taking care of their family or live in more remote areas. The increased use of telephonic and video appearances enhances access to our court system.

Hardworking taxpayers will appreciate that remote appearances are more efficient and save taxpayer dollars. Attorneys who are state funded, prosecutors and public defenders alike, can work on other matters while waiting for their case to be called. Many court hearings involve issues like setting future dates or checking in on a case and do not require in-person appearances.

Due process ensures that every individual is presumed innocent until proven guilty. However, once someone is accused of a crime, they must appear at multiple court hearings, which can mean travel expenses, missed work and child care expenses. Readily available remote appearance technology significantly reduces these consequences, ensuring an accused individual is not punished before their guilt or innocence is determined.

COVID-19 resulted in increased remote appearances but encouraging remote appearance for routine hearings does not mean that every hearing will have an empty courtroom. Trials in which witnesses are testifying regarding important issues will still take place in the courtroom. Remote appearances in routine matters saves taxpayer money, protects our constitutional right to be presumed innocent and promotes access to the court system for all residents.

Michelle S. Bartov
La Grande

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