

Hermiston woman reflects on hellish month with virus

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — It was the Sunday after Thanksgiving when Phyllis Hansell awoke to a splitting headache. “It felt like somebody shot me between the eyes,” she said.

She leaned over and reached for her daily medication, but she was so dizzy that she couldn’t read the labels. “It took me an hour and 20 minutes to do it,” she said, adding that the pills included blood pressure medication. “I sat there looking at it. I was afraid I would take too many pills and do something crazy.”

It had been two days since Hansell tested positive for COVID-19. At 71, she has underlying conditions, like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease — an inflammatory disease that obstructs air from flowing to her lungs.

Seeing as she was especially vulnerable, Hansell said she was always careful to avoid largely populated areas



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian
Phyllis Hansell, 71, poses for a portrait in the living room of her Hermiston home in December.

and to wear her mask. But after a short trip to the grocery store to buy food for Thanksgiving, the virus hit “like a ton of bricks,” she said.

She quickly lost her taste and appetite, just before Thanksgiving, and in the following three weeks she would lose 15 pounds.

Hansell’s doctors grew worried. They called her every day to check in. Even-

tually her pulse oximeter showed readings in the low 90s, which made her and the doctors increasingly concerned that she may need to be hospitalized, she said.

Finally, she went to Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston and received an IV infusion of monoclonal antibodies — a similar treatment to what President Donald Trump received in early October when he contracted the virus. Slowly but surely, her symptoms improved.

Hansell said that she was nervous to take the antibodies, because they are still considered “experimental.” But as a retired nurse practitioner, she knew she had to act fast before the virus reached the later inflammatory stages, which can prove deadly.

“You have to figure out if the benefit is better than the risk,” she said. “What if I don’t do anything and you get worse, and then you can’t have this stuff because you waited too long and missed the window.”

In November, the Food

and Drug Administration issued an emergency use authorization for monoclonal antibodies for all patients who test positive for the coronavirus, saying the therapies “may help outpatients avoid hospitalization and alleviate the burden on our health care system.”

However, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that only 250,000 of the 400,000 patient courses of monoclonal antibodies allocated for the states have actually been delivered. And even fewer are actively being used — somewhere between 5% and 20% of the available supply.

For Hansell, she believes the treatment came just in time.

“COVID is an inflammatory disease of the body and that’s why you’ve got to stop it early,” she said. “Those are the people who I’m afraid are dying — those who wait too long. They think, ‘I’ll just get over this.’ Not necessarily. You’ve got to be proactive on this thing. It’s a different virus

than we’ve ever had.”

Hansell’s daughter, Rebekah, also contracted the virus. The two spent their quarantine sleeping nearly 14 hours per day and eating chicken noodle soup together, Hansell said. They each experienced joint pain, diarrhea and drowsiness, from which they are only just recovering.

“It’s interesting that some people think it’s not going to happen to them or it’s not real,” Hansell said. “But when it happens to you it’s very real. It’s intense. So you need to be careful. All age groups can be affected to a certain extent.”

Hansell also suffers from arthritis in her hip, and due to COVID-19, which is known to exacerbate joint pain, she’s had to use a cane for the first time since she fell off a horse about a year ago.

“It’s a whole body disease. It’s not just the flu,” she said. “Flu is bad enough — influenza attacks your lungs. But it doesn’t attack your heart and your kidneys and your joints.”

Though she is finally beginning to get some consistent sleep, Hansell said her symptoms have yet to subside in total — unlike her daughter, who is 43 and has since returned to work. The virus has left her with a sinus infection and her left ear is infected and clogged.

Upon her full recovery, Hansell is looking forward to volunteering at TruParent Pregnancy Clinic in Hermiston and getting a new puppy in January — a half poodle, half schnauzer or “schnoodle.”

When reflecting on her loneliest days, Hansell holds nothing but gratitude for prayers, phone calls and small acts of kindness and love she received from her family and church.

“That people care and love you, that my doctor and friends would call me three times a day to make sure I was OK, I mean, that’s a lot of love,” she said. “God is good, and he got me through it. I didn’t have to go to the hospital, and I’m very grateful.”

Holland: ‘You learn how lucky you are’

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have the skill to do something, do what you have the skill to do.

“I will miss the camaraderie of working with a group. I enjoyed the team effort of working in surgery. And I enjoyed the patients. I’ve had a lot of nice people and I’m honored to be part of their life.”

Holland said that early on in his life he had no intention of going to medical school.

He had an engineering degree and served as an Air Force pilot, and he didn’t think he was smart enough for medical school. It wasn’t until meeting flight surgeons that he decided it was something he could do.

“I did a bunch of reading,” he said. “I got all enthused and thought this would be interesting. It’d probably do more for people than I could do as an Air Force pilot.”

He began working toward his master’s degree in microbiology while in the military, and when he got out he applied to medical school, but did not get accepted.

It took two more tries until he got into a program, during which time he got a Ph.D. in physiology and biophysics.

At 32, Holland was married with two children, so he went to medical school under the National Health Service Corps, a federal program that supports medical students with the expectation they will pay it back by working in an underserved area.

One of the other requirements was that students pick a primary care specialty, which is one of the reasons he gravitated to obstetrics and gynecology.

Holland spend nine years working for Yakima Valley Farm Workers Clinic in Grandview, Washington, after residency.

While he was there, he



Dr. Robert Holland in Mali.

began medical missions, which have taken him to countries including Mali, Peru, Afghanistan and Haiti after the 2010 earthquake that devastated the country.

“I think everybody should do it at least once,” Holland said. “You ... learn what the rest of the world is like and you learn how lucky you are, and you learn you don’t need all the fancy stuff that you think you do.”

“I enjoy that the most because I came away from that feeling the best about what I did.”

Holland moved to Astoria after about five years working for a practice in Flagstaff, Arizona.

He has been one of the hospital’s longest-serving doctors, and he said it has been exciting watching Columbia Memorial grow.

Erik Thorsen, the hospital’s chief executive officer, said there were times Holland was the only physician in the OB-GYN practice.

“He’s one of the most dedicated and committed phy-

sicians that I think I’ve ever worked with,” Thorsen said.

“He just went over and above all the time. When we were short-handed he would always step up. He would always take extra call, no matter if he had been on call for weeks on end. He never let the call schedule fall, he never let the patients fall and never let the clinic fall. He was always there. And we really built our women’s center around Dr. Holland and recruited then other physicians into the practice. But he has always been the anchor in that clinic.”

“That dedication and that commitment, it’s a hard thing to find. And he had it and exhibited it for all the years that he was here. So I have a great amount of appreciation for his commitment to the community and to the patients that he served during those times.”

“CMH is a much better organization because of Dr. Holland’s leadership and his efforts to improve quality and patient safety.”

Lizzie Wiedmaier, the

manager of the hospital’s women’s center and pediatrics, said Holland became one of her mentors when she began working at the women’s center as a nurse in 2017. She said Holland’s support and encouragement helped her in her transition to a leadership role.

“His calm demeanor will be missed most of all,” she said in an email. “I always loved seeing him stop at the MA (medical assistant) station to tell a joke or two, before heading to an exam room or back to his office. He welcomed many of us into his home every holiday season, and I have missed that most of all this year.”

Holland said that, above all, his favorite part of his career has been delivering babies.

“Most of it’s happy,” he said. “You get to be part of patient’s family.”

“It’s fun to see the families when you’re out and about. Small enough town that you can’t miss them and they can’t miss you.”

Virus: ‘This is something I would not wish upon anyone’

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He said he and his wife’s temperatures rose — bit by bit — and they began feeling weak and fatigued.

“That’s about where Jessica’s symptoms stopped, but I progressed to vomiting every evening, inability to breathe in past about 50% of my normal lung capacity and often feeling ‘dead’ enough by around 8 p.m. that I would just slunk off to bed,” Strecker said. “The worst part of it all was the feeling of complete helplessness.”

“I run a YouTube channel producing weekly videos, and work on other film and art projects in the time between, often for local clients or friends/family, none of which I was able to work on during the roughly 1.5-2 weeks that we were jointly sick.”

Strecker’s mother had a mild version of the illness and recovered. His father’s symptoms were more severe, though, and sent him to Columbia Memorial Hospital, where he stayed for several days before being released with an oxygen tank.

Before getting sick, Strecker said he took the virus seriously. He said he and his wife followed all the suggested guidelines and refrained from visiting anyone other than his parents, who also spent most of the time at home.

“However, now, we feel pretty strongly that even that is not enough,” Strecker said. “Over the 10 months or so that the country/world has been in lockdown from this thing, we’ve gotten a bit lazier as time passes. Perhaps this day I didn’t distance myself from other shoppers at the grocery store well enough.

Perhaps this day I shirked sanitizing my hands after leaving the barber shop. Perhaps this day I decided, ‘Hey, I know this person, certainly they couldn’t be carrying the virus.’

“Now, we are essentially locking everything down — anyone who comes into our house has got to be wearing a mask, no matter who they are. Christmas plans went out the window. We’re currently feeling well enough to basically sanitize and clean every surface in our house after we’ve been sitting around coughing and breathing COVID on everything for a couple weeks.”

He said he plans on trying not to leave his home as much as possible until the vaccine is more widespread.

“Luckily, our family has been very understanding and cooperative with our new ‘guidelines for visiting James and Jessica,’ which is very relieving, considering I figure there may be people out there struggling to convince specific family members of the actual severity of the virus,” Strecker said.

He said he is tired of seeing people on social media dismissing the severity of the virus and spreading misinformation about precautionary measures.

He does not want people to wait until they or a loved one gets sick to do their part.

“This is something I would not wish upon anyone,” Strecker said. “You may look at my symptoms and be like, ‘Eh, I can handle that.’ But they were the worst versions of any of them that I’ve ever dealt with, and as evidenced by how my dad’s body took it, everyone will experience this differently.

“For all I know, I got off easy.”

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