

OPINION



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editor@dailyastorian.com

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GUEST COLUMN

Unvaccinated Oregonians don't trust Brown

Unvaccinated Oregonians don't trust Gov. Kate Brown's advice. But new research shows they also lack faith in COVID-19 messaging from almost anyone else, whether talk radio, Fox News, MSNBC or religious leaders.

Brown's lack of credibility among the unvaccinated is no surprise. She consistently polls among the most polarizing governors in our polarized country. Brown is to Oregon Republicans as former President Donald Trump is to Democrats. As researcher Benjamin Clark told me, "It doesn't appear to us that Gov. Brown is the best messenger for the population that isn't vaccinated."



DICK HUGHES

Clark is co-executive director at the University of Oregon's Institute for Policy Research and Engagement. The survey developed by him and colleague Robert Parker was conducted May 21 to June 26 and involved 351 urban Oregonians and 335 rural residents.

The survey found rural Oregonians are less likely to consider COVID-19 a serious threat, to get vaccinated and to embrace public health measures such as physical distancing and facemasks. Those findings track with other surveys and data from other states.

"This combination of higher risk behaviors in rural areas is likely to create a longer-lasting and more impactful pandemic in Oregon. This combination of factors could create a breeding ground for new variants to emerge that will threaten not just rural Oregon, but the whole state," Clark and Parker write in their report, "Achieving COVID-19 Herd Immunity in Oregon: Progress & Challenges."

They add, "It will be vital to continue finding ways to persuade, entice and encourage residents everywhere, and rural Oregonians in particular, to get vaccinated."

Local doctors and other health care providers provide one answer. Patients trust them — as long as they're not viewed as government agents. The report recommends against handing out materials published by the Oregon Health Authority or local public health agencies. Instead, health care should give materials to health care providers that they can brand as their own.

These findings seem like common sense. They correlate with Gov. John Kitzhaber's March 2020 letter to Brown in which he advised her to take advantage of existing local networks of people.

I checked with a couple of Oregon experts to get their perspective. It turns out that Brown's situation is not unique. "The governor's issue is not just her



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Most new coronavirus cases involve people who have not been vaccinated against the virus.

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Jim Moore | a political scientist at Pacific University

issue," political scientist Jim Moore said. "The governors in states have become lightning rods for everything."

However, Brown doesn't gain anything by her press conferences in which state officials and others laud her leadership and repeat her talking points ad nauseam.

"The way to maintain credibility is to stop being a Greek chorus of cheerleaders and to be more like Anthony Fauci, who when he was standing next to the president, would come to the microphone and disagree or point out, 'Here's the real scientific way to think about this,'" said Moore, a professor at Pacific University. "Everything is so partisan right now that by being a cheerleader, you lose credibility."

Fauci directs the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and is chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden. By the way, the UO research found Biden is more trusted among unvaccinated Oregonians than Brown or national media.

Portland-based pollster John Horvick, who was not involved in the

study, said it's difficult to find spokespersons who will appeal to unvaccinated young adults in the Portland area yet not repel rural conservatives. And vice versa.

"There just are very few messengers that cut across demographic or voting groups that aren't going to alienate some other group," Horvick told me. "Vaccine rates are very partisan and they're also very age dependent."

Liberals and conservatives alike do tend to trust their doctor, he said, whereas most Oregonians pay little heed to politicians.

As for Brown, she'll keep on keeping on. Her deputy press secretary, Charles Boyle, sent this response to my questions about the UO study:

"The governor will continue to provide updates and explain her decisions to Oregonians during a pandemic — including sharing information about the vital importance of safe and effective vaccines. Giving regular statewide press updates to the media is not the same thing as being a sole or primary messenger for vaccines."

SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

From the jungles of Vietnam to rural forests

At 75, Ken Palmrose, who was born and raised in Seaside, is the author of "Out of the Blue: A Young Man's Journey from the Palms of Vietnam to the Pine Forest of the West."

In an interview, Palmrose spoke about his life in Seaside, writing and Vietnam.

Q: Tell us about your time in Seaside. Were you raised here?

A: My family has lived in the area since the early 1900s with Palmrose Dairy owned by my Finnish-immigrant grandmother and helped run by my father. My father and his brothers were well known athletes in their youth.

Our family was all over the Seaside-Astoria area. My parents lived in the area until their deaths and I still have one brother, Ernie, in the area. My family, children and grandchildren have visited Seaside family and friends quite often over the past 50 some years

since I left.

I was born and raised in Seaside and graduated from Seaside Union High School in 1963 and then went to Clatsop Community College for an associate's degree in forestry technology. I went to work for the U.S. Forest Service beginning in Eastern Oregon as a forestry aide, ending up 36 years later as the regional media officer for the U.S. Forest Service southwest region.

Q: Have you always been a writer?

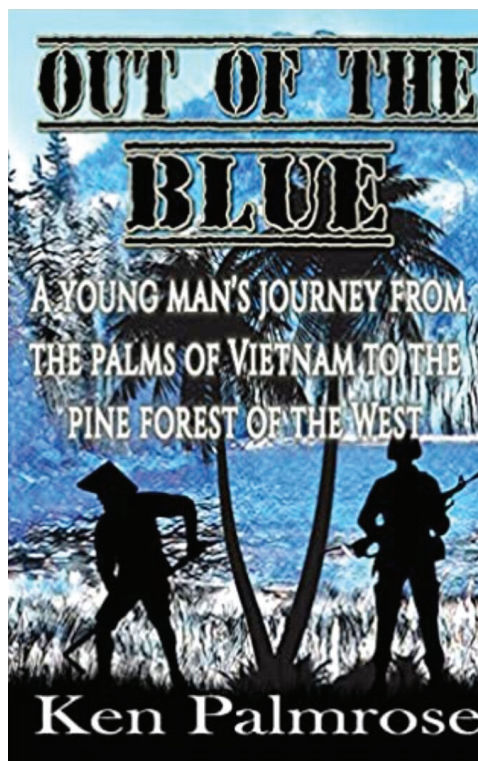
A: This is from my publisher's publicity page: "Ken Palmrose, for many years

during his Forest Service career, was a writer-editor and later was a contributing editor for an extensive Arizona wildfire story titled 'The Monster Reared His Ugly Head.' He has written numerous news and web stories, special feature articles and additionally is an accomplished photographer having traveled to over 25 countries around the world."

So in one form or another the answer is 'yes,' I have always been interested in writing. I was a writer-editor for six years, lots of forest plan-type documents. I was also a public affairs officer for 20 years.

Q: Did you serve in Vietnam, like the character in your book?

A: I was drafted within five months of starting my new career with the Forest Service and ended up after basic training going to military intelligence school at Fort Holabird, Maryland. Seems like they noticed I received good grades in photogrammetry at Clatsop Community College and I ended



up being trained as an imagery interpreter, much of which I already studied.

I was assigned to the 519th MI battalion and we worked in an air-conditioned, secure building near Tan Son Nhut Air Base but were bused every day from 6 kilometers southeast to our compound, which then was out at the far edge of the furthest reaches of rural Saigon.

We looked for the enemy on photos and infrared imagery and plotted bombing runs, B-52 missions, napalm strikes, you name it and other airstrikes. We also did tactical terrain studies to help our troops on the ground find ways to get safely cross country either on foot or in tracked vehicles.

I watched the air base get hit during the Tet Offensive, while a few of us were sent up on the roof of the building for guard duty as the air base perimeter was only a couple hundred meters distant and was under constant attack in all areas. The May Offensive — Ho Chi Minh's birthday —

"Given the political polarization we have seen during the pandemic, it is no surprise that the researchers' survey shows that elected leaders, cable news and local newspapers are also among the least trusted messengers for unvaccinated Oregonians, especially those who are most skeptical about vaccination. ..."

The health authority echoed that statement.

"The strategies highlighted in the UO report are consistent with our own research, and they've been the foundation of our vaccination campaigns since the outset," spokesperson Rudy Owens said by email.

"Getting vaccinated is a personal choice, and we have been focused on acknowledging the questions people have asked and providing accurate answers about the safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines. We've run targeted and extensive campaigns that give voice to doctors, nurses and other medical experts, as well as real people who've shared their vaccination stories with people in their own communities. ..."

However, the UO research indicated that only 29% of unvaccinated Oregonians had moderate or total trust in the health authority. The report stated: "Concerns about the efficacy, side effects and speed of vaccine development are keeping many from getting the vaccine. Known strategies for communicating these public health measures exist and need to be funded and disseminated widely around the state."

I'll close with a few intriguing tidbits from the study and my conversation with UO researcher Clark:

The health authority's public data on COVID-19 cases and deaths should differentiate between vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. Currently, that information is updated once a month and is not easily found online. In June, 92% of cases and 94% of deaths were among unvaccinated Oregonians.

Monetary incentives do little to sway people. However, \$100 cash payments would be more effective than the \$1 million vaccine lottery prize that Brown awarded last week. The \$100 could potentially change the minds of 20% of those who said they would not vaccinate and 33% of those who might vaccinate.

Merely 9% of unvaccinated Oregonians expressed moderate or total trust in Brown. Still, that number was higher than for talk radio, social media news stories, general county government and big corporations.

"Your doctor" and "Your family members" each had 43% trust; "Your friends," 35%; and "Your religious or faith leader," 23%.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.



R.J. MARX

was worse for us as much of the entire areas around our barracks and motor pool were destroyed, but for some reason, they didn't hit our compound, which was only a few acres in size and held over 1,000 people.

Basically, it was a tale of two tours. Seven months before Tet, we could go into Saigon and see the sights, eat and buy local, and seven months after Tet, the war was with us every day from then on. I arrived in June of 1967 and left in August of 1968, 14 months.

Q: What's the origin and concept of this book?

A: Originally I wanted to write a screenplay, nonfiction, but I decided I didn't, at that time, have the patience. So, I started writing a novel based upon a crew of young men from all over the U.S. coming together in one of the most rural forest settings in the West.

As I was about halfway through, I started remembering things about my time in Vietnam and thought, why not fictionalize those as memories in the main character? So I rewrote the whole thing and that's how it ended up. Fiction based loosely on some real events.

Q: Will you be back in the area in the near future?

A: I plan on being back in Seaside in September, as it is my understanding there is going to be some type of formal ceremony for the Vietnam veterans monument at the Cove.

R.J. Marx is the South County reporter for The Astorian and editor of the Seaside Signal.