

Vaccinated man with ALS dies from virus

Wanted everyone who could to get vaccinated

By FEDOR ZARKHIN
The Oregonian

Paul Kirsch got vaccinated against COVID-19 as soon as he became eligible, telling his wife it was a “must.”

Kirsch had been diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in 2018 and wanted to live as long as he could, even as his life became restricted by the degenerative disease taking over his body, said his wife, Emily Kirsch.

Even after getting vaccinated in April, Paul Kirsch was careful, aware that an infection could be fatal. The 65-year-old restricted his social world, meeting only with a select group of vaccinated friends and family, and only in their backyard in Wilsonville, his wife said.

But there was one gap in the protective armor: The very person hired to take care of him. Shortly after Paul Kirsch’s unvaccinated caregiver contracted COVID-19, Paul Kirsch began showing symptoms, his wife said. He died Sept. 5.

Paul Kirsch is one of at least 204 Oregonians who have died from a COVID-19 infection despite being fully vaccinated against COVID-19. While highly effective at preventing severe illness and death, the shots are not bulletproof.

Details of such breakthrough fatalities generally remain scarce, although those 80 and older have seen disproportionately high death rates. And, for those with underlying medical conditions, an infection can still prove lethal.

Kirsch’s death also highlights a gap in Oregon’s COVID-19 vaccine mandate for health care workers. While all employees in health care facilities such as hospitals and doctors’ offices must get shots by Oct. 18, anyone who works exclusively inside someone’s home does not.

Paul Kirsch grew up in Eugene and had led an illustrious life devoted to baseball, including playing and coaching in the minor leagues, finishing his career as a senior scouting supervisor for the Tampa Bay Rays.

Nichole Fry, one of Paul Kirsch’s nieces, remembers him warmly, saying that as a younger man, he was always the charming center of attention. She recalls a summer evening in the backyard, with the whole family gathered around and laughing and her uncle driving the fun.

“He was always the center of whatever hilarious thing



Paul Kirsch, 65, died from complications following a COVID-19 infection despite having been vaccinated against the disease. He is pictured here with his wife, Emily Kirsch.

was happening,” Fry said.

But by his early 60s, what started as weakness in his right arm turned into a fast-paced progression of ALS, also known as Lou Gehrig’s Disease. That didn’t stop Paul Kirsch from living fully, his wife said.

By the time COVID-19 came to Oregon, Paul Kirsch couldn’t walk or talk. In April 2020, he started communicating through a device that allowed him to use his eyes to select words and letters, which the device would then say out loud.

One of his caregivers, Amy Balderas, would spend eight hours a day Monday through Thursday giving Paul food, taking him to the bathroom, showering him and helping with other fundamental life tasks. She wore a mask at all times, Paul Kirsch’s wife said, but he did not.

Emily Kirsch said Balderas was the only caregiver to refuse to get vaccinated against COVID-19, telling her employer she feared there could be long-term effects from the vaccine. Despite all his other precautions, Paul Kirsch decided he would risk keeping Balderas on, his wife said, because she was very good at her job and had been with him for three years.

Aug. 20, a Friday, Balderas said she woke up with body aches and had a fever that lasted through the weekend. Paul Kirsch complained of a headache and fever that Sunday, Emily Kirsch said. Monday, Balderas’ symptoms were worse. She took

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an at-home COVID-19 test that came back positive and called Emily Kirsch to tell her.

Balderas said she doesn’t know how she got COVID-19. She socialized with about five friends and went to the chiropractor’s office the week before she had symptoms.

Even though Balderas had COVID-19, Paul Kirsch refused to get tested for a coronavirus infection because he didn’t have any “obvious” symptoms, his wife said. But two days after Balderas tested positive, Paul Kirsch was having trouble breathing and went to the emergency room at Legacy Meridian Park Medical Center. Staff tested him for COVID-19. The result came back positive, and he was immediately moved to the intensive care unit.

Because Paul Kirsch had an underlying condition, a coronavirus infection was particularly dangerous. He spent 10 days in the ICU, his breathing becoming more and more difficult.

“If you need to go, the good Lord’s waiting for you,” Emily Kirsch recalled saying

in the language they had created meant, “Yes.”

Paul Kirsch died the next day.

Though initially Emily Kirsch was angry at her husband’s caregiver, she said with time she has become more understanding because she recognizes her husband made an explicit choice to keep her on, despite her refusal to get vaccinated.

Balderas said she is considering quitting her career in order to never again risk bearing responsibility for someone’s life.

“It was very devastating to find out he had passed,” Balderas, 40, said. “And then to feel, like, ‘Oh my gosh, what if I did give it to him?’”

While most Oregon health care workers must be fully

vaccinated this month, that rule doesn’t apply to the tens of thousands of caregivers who, like Balderas, provide care only in people’s homes. The Service Employees International Union 503, which represents at least 40,000 home care workers, pointed out that each person getting care is the employer and can set terms of their interaction — including whether they want to hire someone who is unvaccinated.

“A consumer can fire them if they choose not to” be vaccinated, union spokesman Ben Morris said.

Labor law expert Dorit Reiss said there is a long history of allowing clients to work things out with their caregivers. It would also be all but impossible to track whether home care workers comply with a vaccination mandate, said Reiss, a University of California Hastings College of the Law professor.

Even with what she knows now, Balderas said she wouldn’t get the shot. She is afraid of side-effects from all unfamiliar medications and the vaccine because of a one-and-a-half month stretch of panic attacks and a two-year stretch of anxiety following a bad reaction to a new medication.

Instead, Balderas said she would have quit her job caring for Paul Kirsch, her only client. He was “very understanding” of her reasons for not getting vaccinated, Balderas said.

In the days that he was sick, Paul Kirsch regularly expressed that he wished everyone would get vaccinated, given how dangerous it can be to people like him. The family included that plea in his obituary.

“He was very passionate that everybody get vaccinated,” Emily Kirsch said. “Because of what he was going through.”

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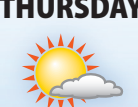
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SEVEN-DAY FORECAST FOR ASTORIA

TODAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY	SUNDAY	MONDAY
 58 47 A couple of showers	 58 43 Spotty showers	 60 42 Mostly sunny	 59 46 A couple of showers	 62 48 A couple of showers	 58 46 Showers possible	 57 43 Showers possible

ALMANAC

Astoria through Sunday

Temperatures

High/low	62/45
Normal high/low	64/47
Record high	81 in 1932
Record low	34 in 1989

Precipitation

Sunday	0.11"
Month to date	0.11"
Normal month to date	0.44"
Year to date	43.09"
Normal year to date	42.23"

Forecasts and graphics provided by
AccuWeather, Inc. ©2021

UNDER THE SKY

Tonight's Sky: The Big Dipper stands in the northwest early this evening.

Source: Jim Todd, OMSI

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	7:19 a.m.
Sunset tonight	6:48 p.m.
Moonrise today	6:08 a.m.
Moonset today	6:53 p.m.

New

First

Full

Last

Oct 6 Oct 12 Oct 20 Oct 28

TODAY'S TIDES

Astoria / Port Docks	Time	High (ft.)	Time	Low (ft.)
12:45 a.m.	7.6	7:15 a.m.	-0.3	
1:22 p.m.	7.8	7:39 p.m.	0.2	

Cape Disappointment

12:20 a.m.	7.6	6:25 a.m.	-0.2
12:56 p.m.	7.7	6:47 p.m.	0.3

Hammond

12:31 a.m.	7.9	6:45 a.m.	-0.3
1:09 p.m.	8.1	7:08 p.m.	0.2

Warrenton

12:40 a.m.	8.0	6:59 a.m.	-0.2
1:17 p.m.	8.2	7:23 p.m.	0.3

Knappa

1:22 a.m.	7.9	8:16 a.m.	-0.2
1:59 p.m.	8.1	8:40 p.m.	0.2

Depoe Bay

12:10 p.m.	8.3	5:53 a.m.	-0.1
none		6:16 p.m.	0.6

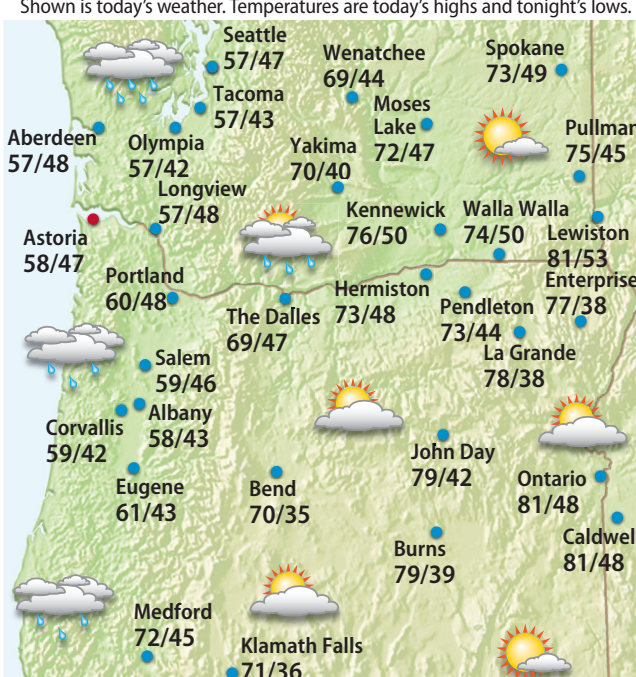
NATIONAL CITIES

City	Today Hi/Lo/W	Wed. Hi/Lo/W
Atlanta	71/67/t	74/67/t
Boston	61/55/sh	67/55/pc
Chicago	70/62/pc	72/64/c
Dallas	86/60/s	86/60/s
Denver	80/50/s	79/49/t
Honolulu	87/75/pc	87/74/pc
Houston	87/61/s	86/63/s
Los Angeles	78/58/t	74/59/pc
Miami	88/77/pc	87/78/sh
New York City	68/62/c	70/62/c
Phoenix	86/70/t	91/71/s
San Francisco	69/58/pc	66/55/c
Wash., DC	79/67/t	72/64/sh

Weather (W): s-sunny, pc-partly cloudy, c-cloudy, sh-showers, t-thunderstorms, r-rain, sf-snow flurries, sn-snow, l-ice.

REGIONAL FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



City	Today Hi/Lo/W	Wed. Hi/Lo/W
Seattle	57/47	
Tacoma	57/43	
Olympia	57/42	
Longview	57/48	
Portland	60/48	
Salem	59/46	
Albany	58/43	
Corvallis	59/42	
Eugene	61/43	
Bend	70/35	
Medford	72/45	
Klamath Falls	71/36	
Wenatchee	69/44	
Moses Lake	72/47	
Yakima	70/40	
Kennewick	76/50	
Hermiston	73/48	
John Day	79/42	
Burns	79/39	
Spokane	73/49	
Pullman	75/45	
Walla Walla	74/50	
Lewiston	81/53	
Enterprise	77/38	
Pendleton	73/44	
La Grande	78/38	
Ontario	81/48	
Caldwell	81/48	

City	Today Hi/Lo/W	Wed. Hi/Lo/W
Baker City	79/37/pc	59/31/pc
Brookings	60/47/sh	60/49/c
Ilwaco	58/51/sh	58/44/sh
Newberg	57/45/sh	60/37/sh
Newport	57/47/sh	59/43/sh

City	Today Hi/Lo/W	Wed. Hi/Lo/W
North Bend	61/47/sh	64/46/pc
Roseburg	59/44/sh	63/40/c
Seaside	57/48/sh	57/43/sh
Springfield	61/42/sh	60/36/c
Vancouver	57/47/sh	60/40/sh