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GUEST COLUMN

I became a statistic

A not-so-funny thing happened on my way to writing my guest column three weeks ago. I became a statistic.

I went from sitting at my laptop to being whisked by ambulance to Salem Hospital with a serious case of COVID-19 pneumonia, despite being fully vaccinated. After a week of excellent hospital care, I'm recovering at home.



DICK HUGHES

Thank goodness that our daughter had insisted I buy a pulse oximeter after testing positive for

COVID-19. I'd assumed mine would be a brief, mild case in line with what was being reported about the so-called breakthrough transmissions. I felt no symptoms other than an annoying cough and extreme fatigue, not realizing it was shortness of breath.

A pulse oximeter measures oxygen levels in the blood. At least 90% is desirable. The ambulance crew found mine had dropped to 40%. I apparently was in "happy hypoxia," far sicker than my outward symptoms indicated.

There are two ways of interpreting my case. One is to infer that COVID-19 vaccinations are imperfect because I fell outside the commonly quoted statistical predictions. That is true.

I prefer a second interpretation. As a nurse bluntly told me: "If you hadn't been vaccinated, you'd probably be dead. Or upstairs in the ICU on a ventilator." These days, most of those patients are ones who are unvaccinated. Too many, depending on one's individual circumstances, won't make it out alive.

Medicine is imperfect, constantly changing and adjusting as we learn more. Just last week, a federal task force reversed its 2016 recommendation that certain individuals take a baby aspirin each day to prevent an initial heart attack or stroke.

Almost every medication or intervention carries risk. So does failure to act.

I chose to get vaccinated because the odds of serious complications or death from contracting COVID-19 are far higher than the risks from the Pfizer vaccine. But I recognize those odds are only societal averages. Statistics don't determine what will happen with any one of us.



A pulse oximeter measures oxygen levels in the blood.

SALEM HOSPITAL RUNS THE BUSIEST EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT ON THE WEST COAST, MADE WORSE BY THE PANDEMIC. SIGNS DESIGNATED SPACES FOR TEMPORARY HALL BEDS. I WAS PARALLEL PARKED UNTIL A ROOM BECAME AVAILABLE, WHICH HAPPENED SOON.

Regardless of whatever decision one makes about being vaccinated or not, for some individuals that decision will turn out badly, leading to severe complications, even death. That is reality. None of us can know beforehand, so we must make our own calculations based on good but imperfect data.

Health officials have declared the vaccines safe. I wish they would more honestly describe vaccines as "relatively safe – safer than most drugs being promoted on TV for other conditions." And no, the coronavirus vaccine does not cause COVID-19.

I was vaccinated in March by Oregon National Guard members and Salem firefighters at the Oregon State Fairgrounds. Research suggests the Pfizer vaccine's effectiveness in preventing infection drops sharply after six months but remains 90% effective at prevent-

ing hospitalization and death. I guess I'm one of those outliers in the 10%, although slowly improving.

Nearly 2.5 million Oregonians have been vaccinated. Infections in vaccinated individuals continue to be uncommon. Being both vaccinated and having had COVID-19, my odds of future infection are low. But I'm still going to get a vaccine booster. And return to wearing masks.

Throughout the pandemic, my wife and I faithfully followed the public health protocols, not becoming hermits – she went to work every day – but being careful. We adapted to wearing masks everywhere, including at restaurants when not actually eating or drinking. We took a road trip to Klamath and Lake counties in May. Trying to fit in, we abided by the local practices, which varied by establishment. But as infec-

tions intensified this summer, I skipped my 50-year high school reunion.

Perhaps I became overconfident about my and others' vaccinations, assuming any infection would be minor. Meanwhile, the Salem area remains a statewide leader in new infections, thanks to the overwhelming presence of the delta variant.

There is no way to tell how I got infected or with which strain. It might have been my forgoing masks when gathering with vaccinated friends. Yes, masks are only partially effective but they provide one more barrier against transmission. It's all about moving the odds in one's favor.

A friend tested positive Sept. 21 after having what he thought was a mild cold. He informed us immediately. The coronavirus has so overwhelmed county health departments that it's pretty much up to individuals in the Salem area to do their own contact tracing.

Feeling puny, I arranged to get a COVID-19 test the next day, although the doctor considered a coronavirus infection unlikely. My wife also tested positive, with a mild but fatiguing case. I was constantly coughing and needing a 10-minute rest before making even the short walk from bathroom to bed.

As I sat down at my laptop to write that Thursday morning, I also contacted Kaiser Permanente for advice, providing my latest oxygen levels. The response: Call 911 immediately. Get taken to whichever hospital has room for you.

The Salem firefighters and Falck ambulance crews were skilled, efficient and gracious. Having covered health care for decades and being comfortable around hospitals, I felt at ease. Besides, for a journalist, every experience becomes fodder for a column.

Salem Hospital runs the busiest emergency department on the West Coast, made worse by the pandemic. Signs designated spaces for temporary hall beds. I was parallel parked until a room became available, which happened soon.

I have great appreciation for the National Guard members helping out. Every movement they performed saved time for a nurse, certified nursing assistant, transporter or other staff member.

Overall, the care was excellent. *Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.*

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

'I pooped'

In the past months, I have learned several things regarding the current state of public education. Earlier this year, Oregon announced high school graduates need not be proficient in math, reading or writing.

I learned a Democratic candidate for governor in Virginia stated that he didn't "think parents should be telling schools what they should teach."

I also learned the attorney general for the U.S. is looking into having the FBI investigate parents who get upset at school board meetings.

This past week, I discovered that Oregon's substitute teachers won't need a college degree.

Finally, I learned prekindergarten kids in public schools come each day with an extra set of clothes in their backpacks.

Of all these, the last regarding parent-teacher forethought was useful when I substituted in a prekindergarten class last week. As I escorted a young man to the restroom, he informed me, "I pooped."

After a moment of sheer panic, we made it to the secretary who told me of the quick change program. The two of us made it to the backpack, and then the restroom, in record time. As an expert in the field of substituting, I must applaud when I see positive results in a program or policy.

As far as the other matters mentioned, it seems parents are intentionally being shut out of their children's education when they need to be involved in all aspects of their children's education, whether it be the books they read or providing extra underwear and pants.

MATT JANES
Jeffers Garden

Just sayin'

I've heard recently that a local fire department has been training and equipping first responders with special hazmat suits, respirators and masking for emergency responses, then sanitizing all upon

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their return. These volunteers deserve all the support and protection possible.

However, it sounds like taxpayers are paying thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of dollars, to protect first responders who refuse to be vaccinated with free COVID-19 vaccines. Just sayin'.

R.D. SMITH
Gearhart

Worthy of our concern

Sitting through public meetings is not everyone's cup of tea. But I've listened

to a few lately, and what I think I observe seems to be unusual, and worthy of our concern.

At Clatsop County, some of the deliberation which used to take place in public discussion appears to be happening in one-to-one meetings with staff and individual commissioners.

The public doesn't get to hear why policy decisions are made through listening to discussions at regular meetings. That's not how our cities operate, and different from what was standard in my 25 years as a public employee.

In other committee meetings, I hear

commissioners stating a policy direction as though it comes from our entire county commission. There's no way for us to know if this is true.

I'd really like to hear more response and deliberation from the entire board so we, as citizens, understand the reasoning of the majority. I also look forward to a return to county commission meetings held at the Judge Guy Boyington Building, distancing and masking as needed, so that our county commission is more accessible to the broader community.

JAN MITCHELL
Astoria