

Eastern Oregon hospital leader peddles virus misinformation

By **EMILY CURETON**
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BURNS — Conspiracy theories about the new coronavirus could be more dangerous in rural Oregon, where rumors waste scant resources and undermine trust in public health efforts.

In Southeastern Oregon’s Harney County, even a hospital leader has spread misinformation on social media since the coronavirus outbreak began in China.

Stefanie Haines is director of clinical services for Harney District Hospital in Burns. Like many rural health care workers, she plays more than one role in the region’s isolated health care system. Haines owns the only fitness center in a town, which isn’t just a gym. It’s also an affiliate of The Wellness Way, a chiropractic company selling pricey lab tests to diagnose all kinds of ailments. The program also markets treatment plans like the “vaccine detox.”

On her personal Facebook page, Haines advances conspiracy theories about the debunked dangers of vaccinations, while promoting services available through the fitness center. Through memes, articles and her own words, Haines has vilified immunizations that protect millions of people from communicable diseases like measles, influenza and polio.

Before people in the U.S. started dying from the new COVID-19 disease, for which there is no vaccine, Haines told friends and followers, “the flu shot increases susceptibil-



Photo courtesy of Harney District Hospital

In Southeastern Oregon’s Harney County, an official with Harney District Hospital has spread misinformation on social media since the coronavirus outbreak began in China.

ity to Coronavirus.”

She linked to a medical study that discusses weakened immune systems as a result of the flu shot, but does not reference COVID-19.

The same day health officials announced Oregon’s first case, Haines shared a political meme about how “#Cornavirus [sic] helps the Deep State,” yet another online conspiracy theory. And as the virus spread, killing more than a dozen people at a nursing home in Wash-

ington state, the Harney County Fitness Center posted an article offering “5 ways to prevent it.”

No. 1 on that list? Get your immune system “properly tested” by buying a lab test from Haines’ side business. The labs range from \$200 to more than \$500, and aren’t covered by insurance. The article’s No. 2 prevention tip: herbal supplements, with a link to the company’s online store.

Haines did not return requests

for comment on a list of posts containing debunked or self-dealing information about communicable diseases. After questions posed by OPB, she took to Facebook in defense of her views.

“The items I share are for the purpose of educating, they are based on my opinion and I don’t suggest anybody do anything, without doing their own research first. That said, I do not feel these concepts are crazy or outlandish, they

simply align with my personal opinion. Not my employer’s opinion, my business’s, nor necessarily my family’s,” the post stated.

The hospital also declined to answer a list of emailed questions. A spokeswoman sent a statement:

“Harney County Health District neither condones nor agrees with the personal opinions expressed by Stefanie Haines. She is a public employee and is entitled to have and express her own personal beliefs. However, the views expressed by Ms. Haines are her own, and they do not represent Harney County Health District or any of its entities.”

Misinformation, especially coming from a health care professional, is dangerous for a number of reasons, according to Dr. Bob Pfister, the chief officer for safety and quality at St Charles Health System in Bend.

“It creates fear and anxiety, which is painful in and of itself, but when people are confused and reacting to false signals like that, unfortunately it makes them less receptive to the actual good advice,” said Pfister, a neonatologist who reviewed some of Haines’ claims about vaccine dangers and COVID-19.

“Bottom line: There are no reports of influenza vaccination increasing susceptibility to the current coronavirus outbreak (COVID-19),” Pfister wrote in a follow-up email, adding he searched five databases of medical literature for any connection.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

