

OUR VIEW

Underlying conditions make COVID-19 worse

Everyone who has died in Oregon from COVID-19 has had an underlying medical condition. So, it was vital that the Oregon Health Authority release the data showing what those conditions have been.

After we published an editorial online last week calling on the OHA to do so, it told us it was planning to do so. The OHA made the data public Tuesday.

Cardiovascular disease was the cause associated the most — in nearly 59% of the deaths. That was followed by neurological conditions with 49%, a category that includes cancer and other conditions with 42%, and diabetes at 33%. There are other categories, including being a former smoker at nearly 25%. The numbers add up to more than 100% because some people have more than one underlying condition.

The data is based on an analysis of 73 of the more than 100 people who



Staff photo by Ben Lonergan

An overhead sign along a predominately empty stretch of Interstate 84 outside of Pendleton advises drivers to stay home.

have died from COVID-19 in Oregon. It is consistent with the warnings from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention about who is at higher risk of the disease. You can see the full

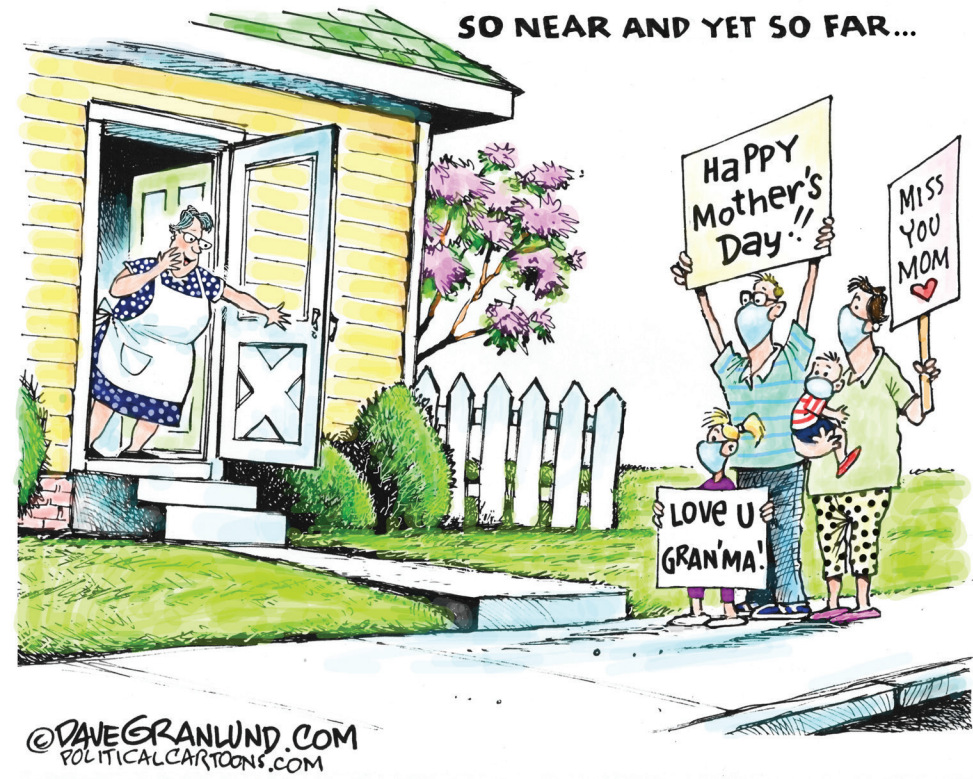
chart on the OHA website.

Most people do not experience severe symptoms if they contract COVID-19. It's not by any means pleasant, but it's primarily fever and cough.

Some people don't have any symptoms. If an infected person is older or has an underlying medical condition, though, it can make it harder for their bodies to combat the infection. The disease can trigger the immune system to overreact, leading to devastation to the lungs and other organs.

The message to take away is this: The disease does hit people harder who are older. But anyone who has an underlying medical condition is at more serious risk. So, if you have a family member or a friend in those categories, please do what you can to help them stay healthy.

Remember, it has killed children in the United States, too. Keep them safe. Follow the precautions you know by heart by now. Government officials in Oregon are planning cautiously to gradually reopen the state. It's up to us to work together to ensure that succeeds and people stay healthy.



YOUR VIEWS

Community editor will be missed

It was with a very heavy heart that I read the last column by longtime *East Oregonian/Hermiston Herald* reporter Tammy Malgesini ("Community editor bids farewell," Thursday, April 30). While I am very relieved that she didn't commit a crime (referring to her last column), I would be remiss not to point out Tammy's long history of supporting the intellectually/developmentally disabled community.

Due to her diligence, numerable stories highlighting the efforts of local Special Olympics athletes were published. Two years ago, Tammy partnered up with E.J. Harris to create a wonderful commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Special Olympics. I also appreciated her support and coverage of the activities provided by The Arc of Umatilla County.

In addition to the emphasis placed on individuals with I/DD, she also wrote very humorous articles on a wide variety of topics. I am not particularly a "dog person," yet I really enjoyed her reflections on her four-legged friends. We have lost so much during this pandemic (including a very close friend) and it

grieves me that I will not be able to lighten my day with Tammy's witty musing on the interesting aspects of life or have her as my go-to person for events related to the I/DD population.

And on a final note, thank you Tammy for all of the times you took the information I submitted to you via email and edited to an all new level. May you have many more amazing adventures and may all of your commas be placed correctly — I'm sure that mine are not. God bless.

**Kristin Smalley
Hermiston**

Returning to normal should be done with care

A recent guest columnist from Prineville opined against the assault on our liberties, how COVID-19 is no worse than seasonal flu, that subjecting rural Oregon to the same lockdowns as denser populations was a big waste. As I write this, more than 66,000 Americans have died in 60 days despite a national lockdown, making COVID-19 much more contagious than flu, killing not only those with health conditions but also randomly striking the

young and healthy.

We see the pictures and stories of health care workers and patients in Italy, New York, Louisiana, etc. How can we not be grateful that despite a recent surge in cases in our county, that our Oregon hospitals have not been overrun with cases?

Reasonable people can argue as we ease restrictions as to how and when it should be done. Yes, this cannot go on forever. But it is so important that we do it smartly, cautiously and as one. As we expand our social interactions, we need to continue using what we have learned to stop the spread, be it hand washing, masks or social distancing. Respect others who are doing the same and be mindful of how your interactions may affect others.

The virus spreads exponentially. Do the math to see what happens if you infect five people and they each infect five people and so on. It takes up to two weeks to see the consequences of exposure today. Each of our individual actions will be the key to success. Let's do it right.

**Anita Burrows
Pendleton**

THIS LAND IS OUR LAND

Fire season 2020: Drought, global warming and COVID-19

About this time of year, wildland firefighters spend a lot of time making their best guesses about the upcoming fire season. A wet spring brings a lush growth of grasses, which can result in an active fire season after the cured grass becomes fuel for spreading fires. Of course, a dry spring also means a busy fire season, because, well, it's dry.

For the record, the spring of 2020 is a dry one so far, with April precipitation in Pendleton about 20% of normal.

However, I learned quite a few years ago from a mentor who never predicted the fire season severity until the end of June. By then, he said, the picture is much clearer, and June precipitation is a huge part of the puzzle.

A few weeks back, Pendleton's lead fire weather forecaster, Mary Wister, provided a fine summary of the three-month fire potential outlook for our area. She pointed out that fire potential will likely remain above average throughout the summer. This is based on some big science, including studies of our mountain snow water content, regional drought indices, and global ocean temperatures and currents.

The past 20 years have seen some phenomenal fire seasons in the U.S., especially in the West. In fact, in this 20-year period, more than half of the fire seasons had more than 7 million acres burned across the country, a number never reached in the previous 20 years (1980-99). This happened despite the fact that we are spending record amounts of money for firefighting aircraft, crews and equipment.

Fire seasons are not only more intense, they are also starting earlier and ending later.

Is this the result of human-induced climate change, a normal drought cycle or something else? This is where the climate change argument can really get rolling, with people firmly entrenched on both sides.

An article recently published in the journal Science suggests that both may be right. A group of authors, led by A. Park Williams of Columbia University, concluded that we are in the midst of a "mega-drought" in the West, the likes of which have only been seen one other time since 800 A.D. They attribute this to normal wet-dry cycles made more pronounced by human-caused global climate change. They estimate that almost half of the severity of the current 20-year drought can be blamed on humans and our effect on the atmosphere, turning what would have been a moderate drought into one of the two worst droughts in 1,200 years.

So yes, it's part of a normal cycle. And yes, human-caused climate change has made it substantially worse.

Long-term drought overlaid with the forecast for weather patterns favoring large fires means that this could be a very interesting fire season indeed. Now, add in the impacts of COVID-19.

Imagine quickly bringing together hundreds to thousands of people from all parts of the country to a remote fire camp far from hospitals. Every day they crowd into dining and briefing areas and work up to 16 hours in dust, smoke and heat. They may go as many as three days before getting a shower, and they wear the same clothes for a week or more and sleep on the ground. More people come onto the scene every day, while others leave to go to other fire camps around the country. Can there be a better situation for spreading a respiratory illness?

Firefighters know the health risks associated with such an environment, with the malady known as "camp crud" popping up nearly every year. COVID-19 has the potential to be camp crud on steroids, drastically reducing the ability of firefighters and fire managers to do their job.

Fortunately, wildland fire agencies have put the best and brightest minds on the job, and in a few short weeks they developed an initial plan for firefighting in the age of COVID-19. This plan touches on every aspect of wildfire management, with pages of best management practices intended to maintain firefighting effectiveness during a pandemic. There is a heavy emphasis on being aggressive during initial attack to keep fires small, of short duration, and producing less smoke — better for the health of firefighters and the public.

There is also practices to reduce the risks to us, the local communities, from firefighters. They don't want to be responsible for causing a local outbreak of COVID-19.

And of course, sick firefighters cannot be effective firefighters, so the plan includes provisions for testing and quarantining people who are sick or exposed to the virus.

So what will fire season 2020 look like in Northeast Oregon? It could be busy, given the climate forecasts. It could be early, given our dry spring thus far. It could be complicated, given the pandemic.

Ask me in June.

Bill Aney is a forester and wildlife biologist living in Pendleton and loving the Blue Mountains.



**BILL ANEY
COMMENT**