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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

Kari Rodriguez, left, and her daughters Madison Peterson, 17, and Adrianna Rodriguez, 13, take a walk Friday, July 30, 2021, along the Pendleton River Parkway, Pendleton. The daily walks offer Rodriguez an opportunity to build up her stamina after a COVID-19 infection last year. Before contracting COVID-19, Rodriguez used to walk the entire length of the 2.5-mile levee without problem; now she struggles to make it half that distance.

'Part of me didn't survive'

More than a year after contracting COVID-19, Kari Rodriguez is still feeling the effects

By **BRYCE DOLE**
East Oregonian

PENDLETON — For six months, Kari Rodriguez kept a note thumb-tacked above her bed with her name, address and allergies to medication.

The note was for her three children. If she didn't wake up, this was what they would tell 911.

"I'd like to say I survived COVID," said Rodriguez, 36, a life-long Pendleton resident. "But part of me didn't survive."

Rodriguez has spent most of her time during the past year lost in an endless daze of pain and confusion. She contracted COVID-19 in July 2020, shortly after her husband tested positive, but she didn't have symptoms and wasn't hospitalized.

She thought she was one of the lucky ones. But things became much worse. More than a year later, she struggles to walk and breathe.

Rodriguez has long COVID-19, a condition where the body breaks down well after the virus has run its course. The syndrome continues to stump medical experts and is having a wide-ranging impact.

A June report by FAIR Health, a health care nonprofit, analyzed private health care claim records for nearly 2 million people diagnosed with COVID-19 in 2020. It found almost a quarter of people develop at least one lingering symptom long after being infected.

"I want to be able to go on vacation. I want to be able to walk the beach with them. Those are huge plans for me, and every day that I get up and do something little is putting me closer to doing the bigger things."

— Kari Rodriguez, Pendleton resident who is a COVID-19 long-hauler

Women are more likely to report long COVID-19 symptoms than men, the study found.

Those symptoms include pain, trouble breathing, high cholesterol, malaise and/or fatigue and high blood pressure. For some, the

effects are far worse. Victims of long COVID-19 can face serious health threats up to six months after they catch the virus, according to research in Nature.

In Rodriguez's case, her symptoms have included vertigo, migraines, gastrointestinal symp-

tom, blurred vision, fatigue, brain fog and leg pain. She also has been diagnosed with Meniere's disease, hypertension, migraines, small fiber neuropathy and, in May, stage 3 chronic kidney disease.

Her only previous health condi-

tion: seasonal allergies and a sore back from having three kids.

Now, Rodriguez is trying to recover one step at a time. It's been more than a year since she's returned to her job at the Safe-way deli. Recently she gained the strength to do her children's laundry and cook them dinner.

"I want to be able to do things with my kids in the future," she said. "I want to be able to go on vacation. I want to be able to walk the beach with them. Those are huge plans for me, and every day that I get up and do something little is putting me closer to doing the bigger things."

And with COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations skyrocketing in Umatilla County, she said she hopes her story will serve as a cautionary tale to skeptics.

"I read the comments on Facebook, and I know I shouldn't do that," she said. "But it hurts so much to see people say that COVID is fake or say that it's just the flu. It's taken my life away from me — what life I used to have."

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Masking up again

New mandate reveals local concerns for next school year

By **ANTONIO SIERRA**
East Oregonian

UMATILLA COUNTY—The era of optional face masks in public schools was short-lived.

On Thursday, July 29, Gov. Kate Brown ordered state agencies to reinstate the mask mandate for K-12 students, a move meant to align with recent recommendations from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The science and data are clear: the delta variant is in our communities, and it is more contagious," Brown said in a statement. "My priority is to ensure our kids are able to safely return to full-time in-person learning this fall, five days per week and with minimal disruptions. With many children still ineligible to be vaccinated, masks are an effective way to help keep our kids safe in the classroom, the learning environment we know serves them best."

The news was still fresh on Thursday, but local school leaders said they weren't surprised by the change in rules. Districts across Eastern Oregon had changed their operational plans to make face masks optional for the 2021-22 school year.

But the pandemic has taken a turn for the worse since the late spring, with Umatilla County at the forefront. Umatilla County has reported some of the highest daily case counts in the state while also sporting one of the state's lowest vaccination rates. In the meantime, there is still no federally approved vaccine for children under the age of 12.

InterMountain Education Service District Superintendent Mark Mulvihill said each phase of the pandemic has been difficult for local schools, but the governor's announcement means 2021-22 will be the third school year affected in some way by COVID-19. With the issues of masks and vaccinations heavily polarizing across political lines, Mulvihill worried about the pressure teachers, principals and superintendents would be under to enforce the mask mandate.

"We are caught in the cross-hairs right now," he said, adding that residents would need to get vaccinated to return schools to normal.

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Price transparency not all it's cracked up to be

Patient variables, markets play key roles in health care prices

By **ALEX WITTWER**
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — The long-awaited hospital price transparency laws have taken effect on the national level, following a landmark bill by the Trump administration requiring hospitals to post their negotiated rates that insurers pay for typical procedures.

For Oregon, it's too little too late. In 2015, the Oregon Senate passed a law requiring hospitals to post the prices they paid for procedures to

the All Payers, All Claims Reporting Program. Analysts at the Oregon Health Authority used the data to make reports about the prices of common procedures.

The prices were all over the map.

Arthrocentesis — removal of fluid from a socket or joint — can range from \$370 to \$4,921 at Good Shepherd Medical Center in Hermiston and costs between \$947 to \$1,091 at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande.

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Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Tonsil removal at CHI St. Anthony Hospital in Pendleton costs \$6,740 to \$7,295, according to Oregon Health Authority data, while the procedure costs between \$8,018 and \$10,281 at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande. Experts say several factors play into the differences.



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