

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

COVID-19 is surging

The demise of the COVID-19 pandemic has been greatly exaggerated.

Driven by the delta variant, which is about twice as infectious as earlier strains of the virus, case numbers have been rising recently in much of Oregon and the nation after a dramatic drop during much of June and early July. Oregon's cases are up 53% over the past week, with the number of people hospitalized for treatment increasing by 40%.

On the positive side of the ledger, the state's weekly average number of new cases is less than one-third what it was during the peak of the pandemic in December 2020. This is to be expected — hardly anyone was vaccinated then. Today, about 68.4% of Oregonians 18 and older have been vaccinated.

The situation is both better — and worse — in Baker County.

The county is faring better than many in terms of cases. Umatilla County, for instance, has averaged 32 new cases per day over the past two weeks. Baker County (which has about 16,800 residents, Umatilla County about 80,000) had about 30 cases for July through the 25th. But the situation turned for the worse earlier this week, when the Baker County Health Department reported 19 new cases on Tuesday, July 27.

Umatilla County's experience shows what can happen in a county with a relatively low vaccination rate. Umatilla County has the fifth-lowest rate among Oregon's 36 counties, at 43% of residents 18 and older. Baker County is just three spots above Umatilla County, with a rate of 46.1%.

This summer has been a welcome return to something resembling normality after the aberration of 2020. But Baker County, as this week's numbers show, is hardly immune to the recent troubling trends. And with students scheduled to return to classrooms Aug. 30, it would be a pity if a big outbreak locally interfered, in any way, with that important milestone, not to mention the illness and potentially the deaths that will result.

Vaccines can't completely eliminate the risk. But they are beyond any doubt the best way to dramatically reduce that risk — and without resorting to shutdowns, quarantines and other steps that cause long-term damage, both mental and economic.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

OTHER VIEWS

Editorial from St. Louis Post-Dispatch:

The thing about standards is, they're worthless unless they are applied uniformly. A standard that applies to politicians on the right should apply equally to those on the left. After year upon year of Democrats ranting and railing about President Donald Trump's penchant for lying and fomenting divisiveness — with The Washington Post keeping a daily count of how many lies Trump told — the same rules should apply when politicians on the left lower themselves to Trump's level. St. Louis' own Rep. Cori Bush deserves to be held to an equal if not higher standard by her Democratic colleagues.

Last week, the billionaire founder of Amazon, Jeff Bezos, flew into space in his own rocket, developed by his company Blue Origin. Bush used the blatant extravagance of Bezos' space travel to make a false and incendiary statement, tweeting: "Jeff Bezos going to space is a good time to remember that Amazon used police violence to harass Black workers in Bessemer, Alabama to stop them from unionizing."

Bush was referring to the campaign earlier this year to unionize Amazon warehouse employees in Bessemer. Bush had joined other lawmakers in traveling to Bessemer to show solidarity with pro-union activists. Ultimately, the Amazon employees voted overwhelmingly not to unionize by a vote of 1,798 to 738.

There was, in fact, a police presence during the unionization vote, but there is no documented police violence of any kind. Specifically, there were no reports of police efforts to harass Black workers. The police presence, which reportedly included off-duty cops hired by Amazon, was tasked with security. The unionization effort was not race-specific. Bush's accusations of police violence toward Black workers seemed a thinly disguised bid to inflame tensions with police and introduce a racial element where none existed.

Trump deserved to be called out for his constant lying via social media. The effect of his antics was to divide Americans and blur the line between fact and fiction. Trump also nurtured the anti-mask and vaccine-skepticism movements that now are causing a resurgence of coronavirus infections. Trump was banned, and deservedly so, from major social media for his behavior.

Bush deserves to be held to the same standard, or at least be warned officially that she's skating too close to the edge. When Bush allows herself to play this game of distortion, she only mirrors Trump's antics rather than rises above them. And she deepens the divide that Trump helped create.

Democratic colleagues who were so quick to denounce Trump also need to apply the same rules to their own side of the aisle. If Trump's needlessly polarizing behavior was not acceptable, then it should be just as unacceptable when the lies emanate from far-left politicians like Bush.



'Pandemic of the unvaccinated' oversimplifies the challenges

Naomi Ishisaka
The Seattle Times

"A pandemic of the unvaccinated." That's the misguided and dangerous statement that took hold last week nationwide as President Joe Biden and CDC Director Rochelle Walensky used it to describe the latest phase of the pandemic, with Biden going so far as to say, "Look, the only pandemic we have is among the unvaccinated."

Suddenly, headlines and cable TV news chyrons all screamed the pithy sound bite.

On its face it seems logical. Cases among unvaccinated people are soaring, and more than 99% of deaths are now among the unvaccinated. COVID-19 cases overall nearly tripled in the past few weeks.

It's tempting for a weary and frustrated vaccinated public to say "well, those people are getting what they deserve." Vaccines are plentiful in the U.S. and it might seem like unvaccinated people are making their own beds with their refusal to accept science.

But it's not that simple and to oversimplify by calling it a "pandemic of the unvaccinated" will only make the problem worse.

I think for many — especially in liberal, well-vaccinated Seattle — unvaccinated people are perceived to be white MAGA supporters who listen to conservative media telling them that vaccines are dangerous and that COVID-19 is a hoax. Yet that perception does not include the Black and Latino people who lag in vaccination rates; it also fails to consider the wider range of people who are unvaccinated or unable to get protection from vaccines.

If we accept the idea that it's now just a "pandemic of the unvaccinated"

and those smart enough to get vaccinated should be able to go back to pre-pandemic life and too bad for everyone else, we are also leaving behind groups like all children under 12 who do not yet have access to vaccines; teens who remain unvaccinated (only 34% of 12- to 15-year-olds are fully vaccinated in Washington state); immunocompromised people who are not seeing immune response from vaccines; as well as communities of color who are hit hardest by the virus. In Washington, for example, Hispanics account for 29% of COVID-19 cases, 13% of the population and only 9% of people fully vaccinated.

Calling it a "pandemic of the unvaccinated" also ignores the fact that the unvaccinated groups are intrinsically connected to the rest of the vaccinated population. A vaccinated parent's level of COVID-19 mitigation has a direct impact on their child's ability to stay safe, for example. An unvaccinated health care worker can have a direct impact on an immunocompromised patient.

By ending almost all mitigation efforts — such as masking and distancing — when Washington state officially reopened a few weeks ago, we effectively hung up the "mission accomplished" banner before the mission was close to accomplished.

Now the delta variant is running rampant and cities like Los Angeles are reinstating mask mandates to try to combat the surge. On Friday, King County's top public health official, Dr. Jeff Duchin, recommended everyone — including vaccinated people — wear masks again indoors.

Early evidence is suggesting that people infected with the delta variant may carry 1,000 times more virus

than the original virus. Even more concerning, in Los Angeles County, 20% of COVID-19 cases in June were in vaccinated people, though it's critical to note, the vaccine still protects against serious illness and death.

Pediatrician and public health advocate Dr. Rhea Boyd said in a July 17 tweet that we need to resist the urge to flatten the motivations of the unvaccinated, writing: "The unvaccinated" are not a monolith of defectors. They are people our health care system has long underserved — Black folks, rural folks, un and under insured folks and young folks." Further, the narrative around "vaccine hesitancy" in communities of color is overstated, Boyd said in a New York Times op-ed earlier this year, and "implicitly blames Black communities for their undervaccination, and it obscures opportunities to address the primary barrier to COVID-19 vaccination: access."

In an interview with journalist Ed Yong in The Atlantic last week, Boyd expanded on her point. She said, "availability and access are not the same thing." There are many reasons why structural barriers might make vaccines not as accessible as we may think for marginalized communities. Barriers can include lacking transportation; no paid sick time to take off work to deal with side effects; lack of credible information; and lack of basic preventive health care.

Boyd's advice? Everyone should wear a mask indoors and in public spaces regardless of vaccination status.

This crisis is not over and it's not just half the population's problem. We are in it together and must fight it together, if we hope to ever see the end of this long, terrible nightmare.

Your views

America's 'war on drugs' needs to focus on supply

America has a drug problem. That's not news. For some reason the demand for drugs is a pandemic that has been around much longer than COVID. Nixon even declared a so-called war on drugs. We locked up some drug dealers and addicts but decades later the problem is worse than before. We have hundreds of thousands of overdose deaths with the resulting misery that comes from that. I will leave it to the psychologists and sociologists to try and understand why people would rather be stoned than sober, why there is such a demand for drugs. I have an opinion on what to do about the supply side of the drug pandemic.

We need a real war on drugs. We need some leadership. I can't understand why my country thought I should go thousands of miles away to shoot some guy in black pajamas with an AK 47 who just wanted to see the invader gone but he was an enemy of our state and those who are killing my country enjoy legal protection. I lost a fireteam partner over

Letters to the editor

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there, a cousin, and some classmates. I lost a son to the drug pandemic.

Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and we decided that within the hundreds of thousands of American citizens a few might be a threat so we interned thousands of good American citizens. I can't understand why we sit by and watch China and Mexico supply the cartels with literally tons of drugs and bring them across our open borders, supply the gangs with their distribution and then fight over drug distribution territory, shoot up the inner cities then call it gun violence.

I had a little experience in war and my idea is that we should really fight a war on drugs. The first phase should be

that Congress exercise its constitutional authority and declare war. A war on drugs that designates the suppliers as enemies of the state. If you are MS13 or in another gang, you are headed to an internment camp complete with barbed wire and machine gun towers. Like Lincoln did in the Civil War, habeas corpus should be suspended until the war is won. You might get out if you supply good information on the suppliers.

The new idea of treating addicts who want something different is the right approach, but it is going to take time to set up programs. In the meantime, it is past time for a real war on the supply side. It is time to rid our nation of this threat. It is time to eliminate the enemy. We have that capability, what is lacking is the will. Our "leadership" has had decades to act. It's time to demand that they support America with the same enthusiasm they show to their big political donors. If they won't act it is time for new leadership, a new congress, a real president.

Steve Culley
La Grande