

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

State's data gap on COVID

The Oregon Health Authority's COVID-19 website is a cornucopia of data, a wealth of graphs, charts and other information.

But the OHA site, informative though it is, also has a glaring statistical gap.

And it's a gap that, unfortunately, contributes to misguided beliefs about the efficacy of the vaccines which are the most potent weapon in our pandemic arsenal. Vaccines drove infection rates down to levels that made the first part of this summer seem reasonably normal. And despite the recent surge driven by the much more contagious delta variant, vaccines remain the key to returning to a society that is not dominated by this microscopic invader.

The information gap involves "breakthrough" cases — people who are infected despite being fully vaccinated.

The OHA is deficient in its public reporting of breakthrough cases in the state. As of Wednesday, Aug. 4, the most recent data on breakthrough cases was a report dated July 1. That's grossly outdated, predating the delta-driven surge — only one of the 1,790 breakthrough cases in the report was confirmed to involve the delta variant. Moreover, the breakthrough case report lacks geographic specificity, with cases shown for just nine regions rather than for each of Oregon's 36 counties. Baker County is part of Region 9, which includes six counties, three of which — Union, Malheur and Umatilla — have larger populations than Baker.

Fortunately, OHA plans to partially rectify this situation. Jonathan Modie, a spokesman for the agency, said breakthrough cases will be reported every other week rather than monthly.

Better still if OHA reports breakthrough cases every week, and by individual county.

The more detailed the reporting, the easier it is for public health officials and others to counter erroneous assertions about COVID-19, and vaccines, that sadly spread much more readily than even the delta variant.

The reality is that although the delta variant is a significant problem, its prevalence is due largely to paltry vaccination rates.

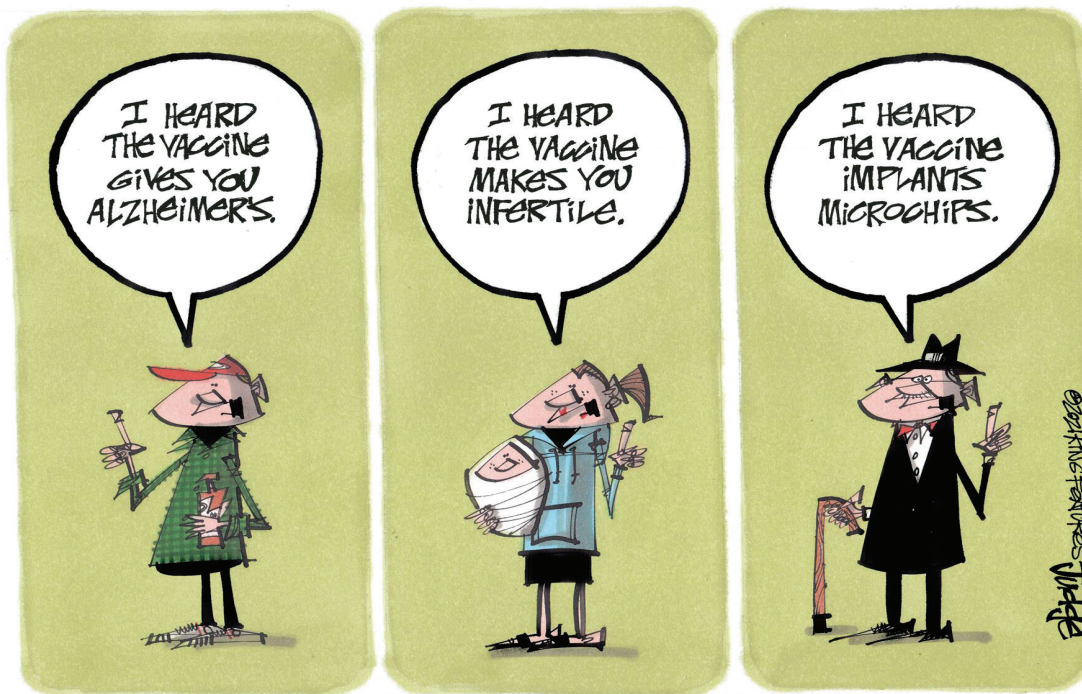
The available vaccines are very effective at protecting people from becoming ill due to infection by the delta variant, according to the Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Center. The Pfizer vaccine, for instance, is 88% effective against the delta variant in preventing symptomatic disease, according to Johns Hopkins, as compared with a 94% effectiveness against the previously dominant alpha variant.

"The current vaccines provide very high protection against the delta variant," according to Johns Hopkins.

And that's vital, because the delta variant, when it does cause breakthrough cases, poses a much greater threat than previous variants. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced recently that research showed fully vaccinated people who are infected with the delta variant have a similar "viral load" as unvaccinated people, meaning vaccinated people are about as likely to pass the virus to others. That research prompted the CDC to recommend everyone, including fully vaccinated people, wear face masks in indoor public settings, a recommendation followed soon by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown's announcement that masks will be required in schools when classes start this fall.

But to reiterate — the risk for breakthrough cases remains quite low because the vaccines are effective against all known variants, including delta. The OHA needs to make that information available to Oregonians on a much more timely basis, and with geographic detail, than it has so far. Without the data, the agency's campaign to encourage people to be vaccinated — as everyone who's eligible should be — isn't as persuasive as it could be.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



WHEN IT COMES TO LOGIC, WE'VE DEVELOPED HEARD IMMUNITY.

Your views

Baker City farmers market has a lot of potential

Maybe it's time to talk about the Baker City Farmers Market. Someone suggested on Facebook the other day I should offer some input on this subject. So here goes.

I returned to Baker City after a 22-year absence. Was pleased to see a farmer's market. Then I saw the response it was getting. Pretty dismal compared to the one in Coos Bay that I was used to. Over there, it's an all-day affair with a festival atmosphere. Vendors, food cooking everywhere. Kids playing. Music playing. It's a big deal and it draws lots of people.

The farmer's market here has several things working against it.

The first is the tiny location. No room for expansion or parking. Second, there isn't that much advertising. People still ask "where is it?" That is an advertising issue. Another problem is the day of the week. People work mid-week. That puts a big limitation on who can go.

My idea is to turn the entire downtown area into a giant Saturday Market. Traffic blocked off except for an emergency lane. All the downtown merchants can have sidewalk sales.

Put up an open stage and invite people to play. You can have food. You can have music. And you can give a definitive boost to the local economy. Every week.

I was told the city council frowns on closing off downtown. That said, these people work for you. You need to tell them this is a good thing for the town and it's what you'd like to see maybe by next year?

Lots of potential here. You'd be darn fools not to use it.

Dan Collins
Baker City

Reversal on masks undermines confidence in COVID vaccines

By Cynthia M. Allen

FORT WORTH, Texas — On Thursday, July 29, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott issued a new executive order that will make it harder for local officials to require face coverings, including in schools, and forbids the state from mandating vaccines.

"Today's executive order will provide clarity and uniformity in the Lone Star State's continued fight against COVID-19," said Abbott in an accompanying statement. "The new Executive Order emphasizes that the path forward relies on personal responsibility rather than government mandates."

Whether you agree with the directive or believe, in light of new masking guidance from the CDC and vaccine mandates for federal employees, that to limit government authority during a pandemic is a fool's errand, you have to give Abbott credit for his consistency and simplicity in messaging: Personal responsibility supersedes government mandates.

That's certainly more than can be said for many public health authorities, who have muddled and undermined their own recommendations with remarkable frequency throughout the pandemic.

The about-face on masks is yet another example.

After months of reassuring Americans that being fully vaccinated neutralized their ability to spread COVID-19, and weeks after issuing guidance that vaccinated individuals no longer needed to wear masks, the CDC is now recommending that even vaccinated people should again be masking indoors.

The reason, according to CDC Director Rochelle Walensky, is that "in rare occasions, some vaccinated people infected with the delta variant after vaccination may be contagious and pass the virus to others."

It's understandable that public health guidance is subject to change as new research emerges; that's a given.

But the explanation was initially offered without supporting data. An internal CDC document upon which the recommendation was apparently made has since shed some light on the decision, but the data contained therein has drawn criticism for its accuracy.

Of course, we know from experience that data (let alone good data) isn't always the driving force behind public health recommendations.

That certainly appears to be the case when it comes to the CDC's other recent recommendation that students as well as all teachers and staff mask during the school year, regardless of vaccination status.

This recommendation comes even though we know from experience (and voluminous research) that COVID-19 is less deadly to children than other common illnesses like the flu.

This is true even for the delta variant.

It is harder for children to get COVID-19 and harder for them to spread it.

And there are legitimate reasons to worry that the masks we make children wear have potentially serious negative consequences, both physical and developmental.

What's more is that it is becoming increasingly clear that the virus surges and declines in ways that human behavior cannot seem to control or explain.

The uptick in cases, courtesy of the delta variant, is real and concerning.

But even The New York Times, which has not always regarded public health recommendations uncritically, acknowledges that the delta outbreaks in both India and the U.K. rose and then plunged without any clear behavioral explanation.

Much to our collective chagrin, human efforts to contain the virus — masking, distancing, shutdowns and even vaccines (if Walensky is correct) — appear to have some control over viral spread, but to a far more limited effect than we like to admit.

That takes us back to Gov. Abbott and his message of personal responsibility.

While that message doesn't resonate with everyone — particularly when it's easier to blame unfortunate circumstances on the behaviors of everyone else — it's starting to have the ring of truth.

But to behave responsibly, people need to have good information from sources they can trust, who acknowledge both what they know and what they don't.

I certainly hope Texans will behave responsibly. When are they going to have the information necessary to do so?

Cynthia M. Allen is a columnist for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Readers may send her email at cmallen@star-telegram.com.

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

President Joe Biden: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (2nd District): D.C. office: 2182 Rayburn Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515, 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. La Grande office: 1211 Washington Ave., La Grande, OR 97850; 541-624-2400, fax, 541-624-2402; walden.house.gov.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR

97310; 503-378-3111; www.governor.oregon.gov.

Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900

Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: Sen. LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.

MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Councilors Lynette Perry, Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane

Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Heather Sells and Johnny Waggoner Sr.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Andrew Bryan, Jessica Dougherty, Chris Hawkins, Travis Cook and Julie Huntington.