

# Opinion

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## EDITORIAL

# Vaccine paradox

Baker County can't fairly be branded as an anti-vaccine place, in the broadest sense. Statistics betray that claim.

The vast majority of children in the county are vaccinated against diseases such as measles, mumps, whooping cough, tetanus, polio, and hepatitis A and B. Overall, Baker County's vaccination rate for those and a few other infections is 91%, according to the Oregon Health Authority. Rates for specific diseases are as high as 97% (for chicken pox).

Given this nearly universal acceptance of vaccines as both safe and exceptionally effective, county residents' reluctance to be vaccinated against COVID-19 is perplexing.

As of Wednesday, Aug. 18, just 47.9% of county residents 18 and older were at least partially vaccinated (most, 44.7% of that age group, are fully vaccinated).

Just seven of Oregon's 35 other counties have a lower vaccination rate.

The comparison between vaccination rates for other diseases, and for COVID-19, is not a perfect one, of course.

Most of the inoculations we receive are for so-called "childhood diseases," and are administered, appropriately enough, during childhood.

COVID-19 vaccines, by contrast, were made available initially mostly to older people, and for an obvious reason — they are much more likely to die if they're infected. Of the 2,964 Oregonians who have died, 73.2% were 70 or older; 49% were 80 or older.

But here's the thing: We're vaccinating almost all of our children against diseases that they almost certainly will never be exposed to. Vaccines are so effective — so long as vaccination rates are very high — that afflictions such as measles have been all but eradicated in the United States. Indeed, epidemiologists have concluded that one reason vaccination rates for such diseases have dipped in some places (although in most areas, including Baker County, they remain quite high) is that few parents today have any personal experience with the infections and thus are more likely to downplay the threat.

COVID-19, of course, is quite the opposite.

The disease has affected almost all of us, if not physically then emotionally or financially (or, sadly, both). This pandemic's effects are more widespread than any since the flu pandemic of 1918-19.

Moreover, we are vastly more likely to be exposed to COVID-19 than to any of the diseases for which almost all of us have been vaccinated. We need only look at the statistics to recognize this — Baker County had more new infections the week of Aug. 8-14 than any previous week.

It's hardly surprising that there was initial trepidation about COVID-19 vaccines. They are, after all, new. And they were developed much more rapidly than other widely distributed vaccines.

But speed in this case reflects the immense capabilities of America's scientists, not a suspension of safety protocols. More than 165 million Americans have been vaccinated. And although COVID-19 vaccines — like all vaccines — cause side effects, some of them potentially fatal, these are extremely rare.

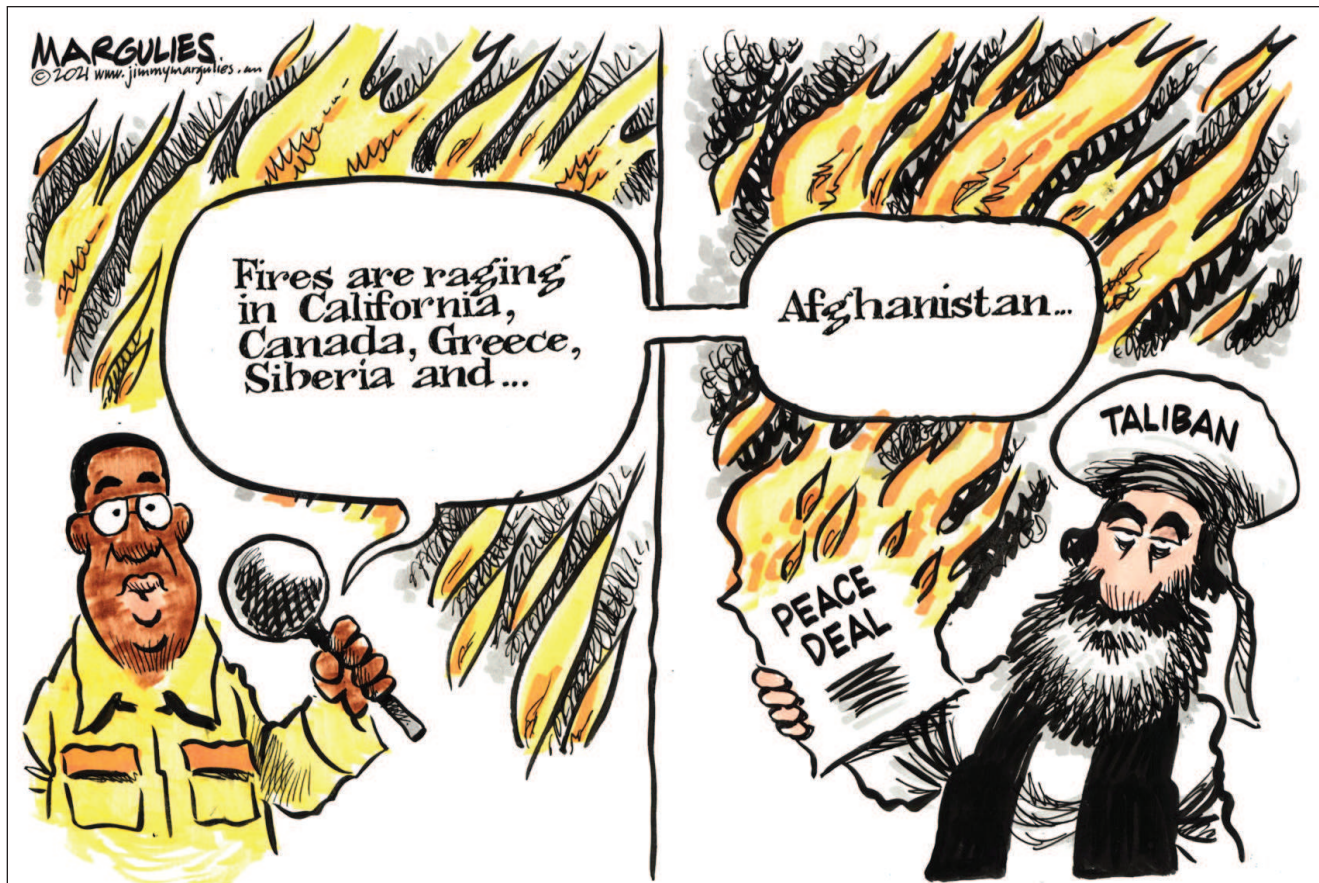
Also like all vaccines, COVID-19 inoculations aren't 100% effective. Variants, most notably the delta variant, are more contagious and contribute to the incidence of "breakthrough" cases — infections in fully vaccinated people. But relatively low vaccination rates also fuel the spread, giving the delta variant a larger pool of vulnerable hosts. This, too, is a reality that can't be refuted — a large majority of cases during the past month, both locally and nationally, are in people who aren't vaccinated. Most COVID-19 patients who are taxing the capacity of many hospitals, and most people who have died recently, also were not vaccinated.

Baker County residents have helped to keep many diseases, such as measles and polio, as historical artifacts rather than proximate threats, by vaccinating their children.

We have the chance to do the same with COVID-19, which has caused far more harm, and societal upheaval, than any of the diseases against which we almost universally vaccinate.

We ought to be grateful for this opportunity. Far more grateful than we've so far been in Baker County.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



# Respecting health care workers

Dr. Eric Lamb and the team at the Baker County Health Department as well as a lot of people at clinics and hospitals here and throughout our area are doing everything they can to care for our friends, families and neighbors. With the recent surge in COVID cases, that work is as important as ever. Despite that, there have been negative comments directed at Dr. Lamb and other health care professionals.

Physicians like Dr. Lamb and myself graduate from high school and college, go to four years of medical school, and then complete a three-year residency program. Both of us have practiced for more than 20 years. Dr. Lamb also happened to go to pharmacy school and practiced as a pharmacist prior to going to medical school. The health department has followed evidence-based guidelines in recommendations guiding attempts to minimize the spread of COVID as well as vaccine administration. There are many reasons for people to have differing opinions and we should respect those opinions. But that doesn't change the science behind the recommendations.

As of Aug. 9, over 166 million people in the US have received a vaccination and just over 8,000 people have had breakthrough infections reported to the CDC. That means that less than 0.005% of vaccinated people have had breakthrough cases. The hospital in Baker has been sending patients who are seriously ill with COVID to hospitals in Boise throughout the pandemic



JON SCHOTT

as have most rural hospitals in our area. Governor Brad Little in Idaho recently shared that:

- 98.9% of new COVID-19 cases since Jan. 1, 2021, were people not vaccinated.
- 98.6% of COVID-19 hospitalizations since Jan. 1, 2021, were people not vaccinated.
- 98.7% of COVID-19 deaths since Jan. 1, 2021, were people not vaccinated.
- Since May 15, there have been 10 times as many COVID-19 cases among unvaccinated people compared with vaccinated people.
- Since May 15, there have been 13 times as many COVID-19 hospitalizations among unvaccinated people compared with vaccinated people.
- Since May 15, there have been eight times as many COVID-19 deaths among unvaccinated people compared with vaccinated people.

The vaccines, developed during "Operation Warp Speed," are not perfect, but no vaccine is. They continue to be our most effective tool at battling the pandemic helping our economy rebuild and allowing us to return to some degree of normalcy. We all have political and personal views that impact our decisions and that is good. We also can make informed decisions about our health care. If anyone needs additional

information, talk with your primary care provider or call the health department.

Hospitals throughout our region are being stretched to capacity. Staff are working extra shifts and dealing with sick, frustrated and sometimes angry patients. Elective procedures are being delayed in many facilities because of resource limitations resulting from the surge. None of us want to see what's occurring in other areas in the nation where acute medical conditions may not be cared for optimally as a result of this. Health care professionals are putting their own health at risk as a result.

The intent here is not necessarily to change minds. Having said that, our health care professionals deserve our respect and gratitude regardless of one's decision as to what's best for them individually. Don't confuse political or personal convictions with what science and the outcomes to date show. Over 620,000 Americans have died as a result of the infection since the pandemic began. Many of them would have been prevented by vaccination.

Please strongly consider getting vaccinated if you haven't already and regardless of that decision or the reasons behind it, please respect those trying to care for us all.

*Dr. Jon Schott is the medical director for St. Luke's Health Partners in Boise. He was the medical director at the Baker County Health Department prior to Dr. Eric Lamb.*

## Your views

### Baker City film festival deserves more attention

Once again I am dumbfounded! The disturbing lack of local interest and support for one of the most unique and entertaining film festivals on the planet is confusing, to say the least. In case you haven't heard, "your" Baker City is home to the world class "We like 'Em Short" Film Festival." I find it strange that so few have come to see it; it has been part of your community for 12 years. In 2014 it received the "Ovation Award" from the Oregon Festival and Events Association, deeming it the "Best Fine Art/Performing Arts Festival" in the state of Oregon! This year the WLES had 171 films submitted from 29 different countries, sort of a big deal for our small town.

For 10 years, with their generosity and support of the arts, Teresa and Dan McQuisten offered the historic Eltrym Theater (another local gold nugget) as the venue for WLES — thank you! When COVID decided to change our world it was moved to the historic Churchill School where it was shown outside. Oh yes! There is a drive-in theater in our little city! This year Thursday's "family friendly" show was on the drive-in screen and, with the addition of comfortable seating and an indoor screen, the other three days/four screenings was again at Churchill. This is where, I am guessing, it will remain for the future (provided it doesn't fall to the wayside through lack of support?). I was able to view the whole four-

day event this year, and there is not enough words to describe my delight. The evening screenings offered some of our best local Mexican food and a full bar! The only thing missing were the people, no reason it shouldn't be packed? Please mark your calendars for next year, you will be rewarded with some of the best short films in the world! Thank you, Brian Vegter, for your vision of bringing incredible fine art to our community and your determination to have it continue. Thanks to all the filmmakers that made me think, laugh and cry. Please support anything local.

Mike Meyer  
Baker City

### Railroad quiet zone has been a boon for La Grande

A quiet zone (QZ) is an investment in Baker City's health that will pay dividends indefinitely. La Grande initiated their QZ almost two years ago and much has improved since. I wish the same for Baker City residents. A QZ will limit intrusive train horn blasting which will increase your quality of life. Businesses will do better, property values will increase, which in turn is good for the city. QZs offer all these benefits, but most importantly, Quiet Zones are safer. Noise is a well-established risk factor for poor sleep (duh!), stress, anxiety, hypertension, and poor learning. La Grande motel owners lost business due to this noise. One owner kept track and found he'd lost \$9,000

in 2016 alone, counting only obvious cases. Many customers say nothing and never return. Countless others read scathing reviews on Yelp or TripAdvisor and kept driving. The motel owner's stories are chilling: "If horns blast while they are checking in — they leave. If the horns blast after they've settled in they will return to the office, request a refund and leave. I will never see these people again!"

Train horns discourage people from relaxing and enjoying your shops, restaurants and lodging.

QZs are safer by requirement. The Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) has detailed guidelines to ensure your QZ is safer than before. The FRA has exhaustive information on the accident history of every crossing in the United States. Experience shows that certain physical barriers are more effective than horns at preventing mishaps. Barriers are better than horns at preventing accidents. Like Baker City, we in La Grande were misled to believe these improvements would cost millions. We ended up spending about \$200,000 — including some extra, unrequired improvements to an intersection. Engineers are still allowed to sound horns in emergencies at their discretion but are no longer required to routinely use four blasts at every crossing. If you love train horns take heart, you'll still hear them from crossings outside the QZ, just not so loudly!

John Winters  
La Grande