

The Blue Mountain EAGLE

Grant County's newspaper since 1868

Wednesday, May 5, 2021

153rd Year • No. 18 • 18 Pages • \$1.50

MyEagleNews.com



Eagle file photo

Grant County Public Health Administrator Kimberly Lindsay

Variant of interest at play in Grant County

CDC: B.1.526 mutation less susceptible to certain monoclonal antibody treatments

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

A variant has likely contributed to the uptick in COVID-19 cases in Grant County.

Grant County Public Health Administrator Kimberly Lindsay confirmed the virus variant B.1.526 has been identified in Grant County but said she could not provide specifics about where it was located.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies B.1.526 as a "variant of interest," which is being monitored, but not a "variant of concern" that has been shown to cause increased transmissibility or disease severity.

In Grant County's region seven, shared with Deschutes, Harney, Klamath, Jefferson, Klamath, Lake and Wheeler counties, the Oregon Health Authority reports 13 variant cases.

Dr. Anthony West, a senior research specialist at the California Institute of Technology, is the lead author of a research paper detailing the institute's recent work on the B.1.526 variant.

West said that a variant of SARS-CoV-2 — the virus that causes COVID-19 — has a small number of changes to its genome. He said a few variants appear to spread more rapidly than others.

West and other researchers at Caltech first discovered the rise in B.1.526 by scanning for mutations in hundreds of thousands of viral genetic sequences in a database called GISAID.

He said the fraction of B.1.526 viruses increased rapidly in early 2021. West said roughly half the B.1.526 viruses carried spike protein mutation E484K, which adversely impacts a specific subset of antibodies against COVID-19. Certain monoclonal antibody treatments may be less effective, according to the CDC.

West said people who had been infected before or were vaccinated were able to offset the B.1.526 in lab experiments but not as well as the original version of the virus.

West said researchers saw uncertainty in February about how well the vaccines

See Variant, Page A18

'Extreme' frustration

Despite valid arguments against COVID-19 lockdowns, misinformation muddies the waters in Grant County

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Tensions are flaring over COVID-19 — and so is misinformation.

Several residents urged Grant County leaders to publicly proclaim the county would not comply with Gov. Kate Brown's executive orders designating "extreme risk" and banning indoor dining at restaurants and bars in 15 counties, including Grant, to slow a spike in COVID-19 infections at the April 28 county court meeting.

Letters of opposition were sent to Brown by U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, state Sen. Lynn Findley and state Rep. Mark Owens, all Republicans, and a group of 27 county commissioners, including Grant County's Sam Palmer and Jim Hamsher, along with the Association of Oregon Counties and the Oregon Restaurant and Lodging Association.

"Respectfully, enough is enough," Findley and Owens wrote, citing the impact on small businesses and stating no evidence has shown that small businesses spread COVID-19 while following the public safety measures.

"It is no coincidence Oregon has not seen one instance of a super spreader event tied to our hospitality industry," the letter from the commissioners states. "...You must know restrictions on specific types of businesses compared to others within our local communities is creating rifts and dividing people rather than bringing Oregonians together."

The frustration expressed at the county, state and national levels was evident at the April 28 county court meeting, when County Judge Scott Myers asked Rex Blackstone not display the protest sign he brought, stating, "No more masks," "Down with Brown" and "Communists Overseeing Viciously Inciting Dictatorship (sic)."

Bill Newman from Monument told the court, if residents want to get their country back, it would need to start in the county.

When county court members explained the county could get sued if it failed to follow the guidelines and could lose state funding for schools, hospitals and other programs, Newman asked if the money was worth it.

"Somebody has got to grow a spine and stand up," he said. "Regardless of whether you expect results from it or not."

Despite echoing many of the valid opinions that were expressed in the letters to Brown, however, many of the arguments made in Grant County also relied on misinformation.



The Eagle/Steven Mitchell

Grant County resident Bill Newman addresses Grant County Court on April 28 about COVID-19 restrictions.



County Judge Scott Myers.

Masks and the 'Stanford study'

Newman said he could not find a "solitary example" that masks help prevent the spread of the virus but claimed to have seen "tamped down" studies showing they are ineffective.

Palmer incorrectly cited a Stanford University study, stating masks are detrimental to long-term health.

However, according to Stanford's Senior Manager of Media Relations Lisa Kim, the study's author, Baruch Vainshelboim, had no affiliation with the university when the journal, dubbed "Medical Hypothesis," published the article.

"Stanford Medicine strongly supports the use of face masks to control the spread of COVID-19," she said.

She said Vainshelboim was a one-term, one-year visiting scholar in 2016 for "matters unrelated" to the 2020 article about face masks.

"BE CONSCIOUS ABOUT WHERE YOUR RISK IS AT. DON'T MAKE IT POLITICAL, BECAUSE THE VIRUS DOESN'T CARE WHAT POLITICAL PARTY YOU ARE, WHAT YOU THINK ABOUT POLITICS. IT'LL KILL YOU JUST THE SAME, ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE NOT VACCINATED."

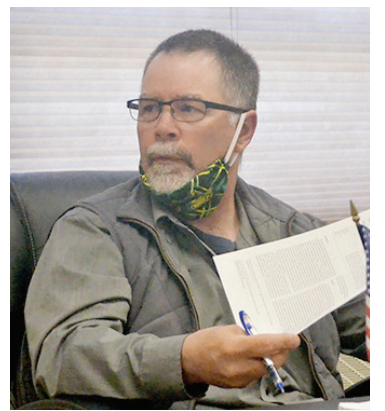
—Dr. Jeremy Kamil, an associate professor of microbiology and immunology at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center

Palmer, a registered nurse, said the study looked like medical journals he reads to stay current with changes in medicine.

"Maybe I should have done a little more homework," he said. "But I'll own what I did."

Palmer issued an apology to Myers, Hamsher and Grant County's residents for quoting the debunked study.

Still, as a "health care advocate," Palmer said he does not believe masks are the answer to curbing the spread of COVID-19.



County Commissioner Sam Palmer.

Dr. Jeremy Kamil, an associate professor of microbiology and immunology at the Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, disagreed with Palmer's assertion.

"The preponderance of public health data is overwhelmingly in favor of how efficacious masks are at preventing the spread of flu and other respiratory viruses," he said.

COVID-19 vs. influenza

Newman said the pandemic is a "ruse to gain power."

Myers pointed out the virus had been a "deadly ruse, for millions." COVID-19 has left four dead in Grant County, 577,489 dead in the United States and 3.2 million dead around the world, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center.

Newman said there is no question that a "bug" is making people

See Frustration, Page A18

County budget committee mulls reductions of hours

Discussion on furlough days continues May 12

By Steven Mitchell
Blue Mountain Eagle

Grant County's budget committee mulled reducing hours in its non-union departments to avoid permanent layoffs as it looks to fill holes and balance the budget before the July deadline.

Treasurer Julie Ellison said the county could save \$36,000 if employees cut one day a month for one year. However, she told the committee the employees could lose health insurance with the reduction in hours.

Ellison said the county could save \$50,000 by including its full-time elected officials in a one-day-per-month furlough.

She told the committee that the



Bob Quinton

county would "eat" the money if it did not make the reductions permanent.

"We don't have any extra revenue, and you're gonna be right back in the same spot," she said. "So, furloughing is not the

answer."

Budget committee chairman Bob Quinton said possible solutions were permanent layoffs or cutting overtime and comp time.

Committee member Amy Kreger said, in her opinion, the fairest option would be to make an across-the-board reduction that would allow employees to keep their jobs and benefits intact.

"Keep the benefits," she said. "Size down fairly so there isn't hatred in your building."



Kathy Stinnett

Justice of the Peace Kathy Stinnett said elected officials would have to volunteer to take a reduction in pay. Along with County Judge Scott Myers and Ellison, Stinnett said she would be willing to take a cut.

Palmer asked how departments would stagger schedules and who would make the decision. Kreger said that would likely be a department head decision.

Human Resources Manager Laurie Cates pointed out the County Clerk's Office is mandated to be open for a certain number of hours and said, in her opinion, the court should make a "blanket call."

Palmer said the committee should bring in department heads on future discussions about the reductions to make



Julie Ellison

sure to "get it right." Quinton agreed. He said the county's most considerable expense is personnel.

Ellison said some employees might be upset at the prospect of losing hours because the county approved additional positions in some departments that were not budgeted.

"Nobody likes it, and it won't be 100% fair," Kreger said. "Because when you get down to the nuts and bolts, there are some places that cannot be cut."

The next budget committee meeting is from 1-4 p.m. Wednesday, May 12, at the Grant County Courthouse.

To phone in, call 541-575-4014. The meeting identification number is 8357#, and the PIN is 4499#.

