

April 27, 2022, Weekly Briefing Transcript

Dr. Podolsky:

Good morning. I'm Dr. Daniel Podolsky, President of UT Southwestern Medical Center, and I welcome all of you who are joining me this morning for this month's Campus Update. Although it has significantly receded from the forefront, I will begin as I have in past briefings over these past two-plus years with a review of where we stand with respect to the pandemic, and that is certainly in a much better place than we were earlier in the year. I did have the chance to see a little earlier this morning the most recent weekly update from our multidisciplinary modeling group. You'll have a chance to see that for yourself when we post it later in the day, but it is generally an encouraging, forward-looking report. Certainly at present, we are seeing very low rates of positivity within our own campus, really at the 1% level for those being tested for any of a variety of reasons, and the model suggests that we will continue to see these relatively low rates for at least the next several weeks, and well into the summer.

Dr. Podolsky:

That's not to say that COVID has left entirely. On the contrary, even though the numbers are quite low in the region, they have risen modestly over the last week or two. That might represent the impact of what we do know now has been a progressive intrusion into North Texas of a subvariant of the Omicron virus, including the very most recent one, which has been seen in increasing frequency up in the Northeast. That's the BA.2.12.1. And indeed, our colleagues collaborating across the clinical labs and the McDermott Center have documented for the first time in this last week that that variant is here in North Texas. Translating all of that to what we're seeing on campus, I'm certainly glad, when I think about where we were in January, that over the past couple of weeks, our census, actually both at Clements University Hospital and at Parkland, has been in the low single digits.

Dr. Podolsky:

And therefore, clearly an environment in which we're able to focus significantly on all of the variety of medical needs of the patients who come to us for care. Within our own campus community, the numbers of infections among UT Southwestern employees remains low, but it has increased from the prior two weeks. Last week, we had 37 members of our community who tested positive, all but two community-acquired. But I do note that two of them were transmissions that occurred on campus in nonclinical environments. So what is the take-home message from all that? It's that we're certainly in a period in which COVID prevalence and new cases are low, but they are not nonexistent.

Dr. Podolsky:

And so some prudence is obviously the order of the day, but at the present time, none of that suggests a need to alter or reconsider our operations. So we'll continue to follow this quite closely, to be alert to changes, which might warrant a return to our past practices, which served us well in past surges. But for the present, we will continue on our current course. And with that, I want to turn to other matters here on the campus. It's this time of year when we are deeply engaged in planning for our next fiscal year, and indeed tomorrow, we'll have the official kickoff of the FY23 budget process. And that will include sharing the basic framework for guiding how departments and centers will formulate their budgets for this coming year. As ever, we will need to exercise discipline to be sure that we have, at the end of that year, a positive margin, which gives us the financial strength to continue to deliver on our mission.

Dr. Podolsky:

This year, we go into it with a strong enterprise. There's been outstanding work, really across all sectors of the campus, a strong growth in our NIH-funded research. And that of course is the foundation in research discoveries, which ultimately will impact the well-being of not only our patients, but patients everywhere. Really a tremendous growth in our clinical enterprise, and that continues to also provide strength. And against all that, we also move ahead on all our missions looking into this year, making further progress in the launch of our Peter O'Donnell Jr. School of Public Health, and our many other priorities. But I do note that we will face a challenge in this next fiscal year unlike any in the other 14 years that I've been here at UT Southwestern, and it's not something that will surprise anybody listening this morning.

Dr. Podolsky:

And that is the impact of inflation. Nobody who has gone to a grocery store or supermarket will be unaware of just the pressure of inflation on the costs of everything in our personal lives, but certainly that's also true in everything we do on our campus. And so that reality will require us to be that much more disciplined on how we can control the expenses as we deliver our patient care, as we carry out our research, as we support our learners across the campus. And I know that we will rise to the occasion as we have in every past year, whatever the challenges are. And while this is a new challenge, it's certainly not the first challenge that we've seen from one year to the next, but that's the challenge facing us in the coming years. So I appreciate all the hard work that's already going on for those who have begun to formulate that budget, and look forward to working with all of you to get to a robust plan for fiscal year '23. So moving past the budget, let me turn to another favorite topic, compliance training.

Dr. Podolsky:

I learned earlier this week that 16,000 of us, faculty, employees, and staff, have completed our annual compliance training. And that's great, but we have got to get to the point where every single one of us have completed that training. This is important for two reasons. I know that it's not something that many actively look forward to, but it's important, because we place importance on the integrity of everything we do and doing the right thing. And part of doing the right thing is also knowing what that right thing is, and that is what this compliance training is meant to accomplish. And it's the basis for the trust of our stakeholders in what we do, and it's on that basis that we can count on their support. So for those of you who have not yet completed, I urge you to do that before the deadline. As you will have known from communications, there will not be any email functionality for those who have not completed their compliance training by the deadline. This year, the compliance training consists of two modules: one, ethics compliance and our institution's expectations; and part two, privacy and information security.

Dr. Podolsky:

Having completed it myself, I can assure you that there is meaningful... Every component of that is truly meaningful for what we do on the campus. And if in doing it you might wonder, "Well, in my role, do I really need to know this aspect of it?" We want to be sure that everybody on campus really understands that they are connected to everything that goes on on campus. So please complete that annual training by next Friday, May 6. On the theme of coming attractions, I'd like to mention some important events that are coming up fast. Just tomorrow, we'll have a President's Lecture Series. That's at 4 p.m. It will be live in the Gooch Auditorium, but you can also follow by livestream remotely. The speaker for this

week's President's Lecture Series is Dr. Genevieve Konopka, who will present her lecture titled "What Makes Us Human: Exploring Brain Cells One at a Time," and I'm sure you will find that truly fascinating.

Dr. Podolsky:

On May 6, I guess coincident with the deadline for compliance training but unrelated, we will have what has become a great annual event, our Health System Celebration of Excellence. It's an opportunity to hear some really innovative and really inspiring work that goes on in our Health System to really advance our commitment to excellence in everything we do. And that will take place, as I say, next Friday, May 6, from 8:30 a.m. until noon that day. Looking a little beyond it, we're coming up to what is a really important milestone in kind of the annual cycle of life here on UT Southwestern's campus. That is our commencement ceremonies for both our Medical School and our Graduate School. Our Medical School commencement will take place on May 12, and I'm pleased to say that our commencement speaker this year will be Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson.

Dr. Podolsky:

As many of you will appreciate, Congresswoman Johnson has represented her congressional district, which includes the UT Southwestern campus, for decades now, has been a really tireless champion for science and research, including advancing the mission of UT Southwestern, and I'm grateful that she's agreed to be our speaker. On May 19, we will have the graduation ceremonies for our school, our Graduate School, and our speaker there will be our former Vice Provost for Basic Science, Basic Research, Dr. David Russell, and I greatly look forward to that as well. The last thing I'll mention before turning to your questions is a new member who will join us on May 1 in leading our Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. Dr. Heakyung Kim comes to us from Cornell University and Columbia University, where she's been Vice Chair of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation.

Dr. Podolsky:

She has been an innovator in finding treatments for various conditions of spasticity in particular, an expert in the treatment of children with cerebral palsy, and I know will bring great additional leadership and energy to our Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. And I also want to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Kathleen Bell, who has led that Department since 2014, has provided outstanding leadership advancing that Department, and with it our whole institution. I'm pleased to say that she will continue on a part-time basis on our faculty, but again, express my gratitude on behalf of the entire campus. And with that, I'm going to turn to your questions. And I'm here with Jenny Doren, as I have been in every other briefing since the pandemic began.

Jenny Doren:

Well, it's nice to be back, and good morning, Dr. Podolsky. I want to begin with a question that multiple people are resurfacing, and it's about masks. What will it take for us to stop wearing them in clinical spaces?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I appreciate the question, and I know this is one of high interest, because I've heard it many times before this briefing this morning. I do know that you will be seeing reports about mask restrictions being relaxed in some states and settings, and this has been the practice to a degree on our own campus for several weeks now. Obviously, we removed the requirement for masks in our nonclinical environments, almost if not actually two months ago. But in accordance with the CDC recommendations and

guidelines, masks remain required in our hospitals and clinics where patients are present. So we have given optionality for wearing masks or not in our clinical facilities, but only within the parts of those facilities that are not patient-facing.

Dr. Podolsky:

Any adjustment to our practices of requiring masks where there is a possibility of facing a patient will be informed, as it has been all along, by guidance from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services and the CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But until they modify their guidance, all patients, their families, and guests, will still need to wear a mask when visiting us in our facilities. We will continue to monitor this very closely, and we're keenly aware of just how much interest there is in the topic, and I think for most, eagerness to see us take that next step.

Jenny Doren:

What about screeners at the entrances of our hospitals and clinics? Are they going to be there indefinitely?

Dr. Podolsky:

No. Given the very reassuring trends which I noted in my initial comments, we feel comfortable now in reassigning our screeners to other duties. We are beginning the process this week with all ambulatory screening discontinuing at the close of business this Friday. And starting on Saturday, screeners will no longer be stationed at the entrances to our hospital. This also means temperature checks will discontinue, but all of this, of course is subject to change if we see unfavorable trends emerge at any time. In the meantime, representatives from Guest and Patient Services will remind patients and their families who enter that they will need to require a mask, as I touched on just a moment ago. You will also note new signage that states, "Mask required while visiting today," including lobbies, hallways, elevators, restrooms, clinic areas, and other public spaces. The sign goes on to read, "Thank you for helping us protect the health and safety of our patients and staff." Additionally, patients will continue to be questioned about any COVID-19 symptoms or exposures in their precheck and screening in MyChart before any scheduled visits.

Jenny Doren:

Given all that you have spoken about this morning, at this point in the pandemic, what precautions do our infectious diseases experts advise for individuals who are fully vaccinated? Carry and use hand sanitizer? Wear mask when indoors? Only in large groups? Not at all? What are you hearing?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, as has been the case throughout the pandemic, everybody's situation is different, and so there's not a one answer that serves as appropriate for everybody and every circumstance. Our vaccination status, personal medical conditions, as well as the health of those living with us should all be considered when determining what's an appropriate level of practice, so to speak, to maintain our own safety and the safety of our families. Vaccination remains one of the most important protective measures against severe disease, hospitalization, and death due to COVID-19. And I would note that at this point, we have complied with the federal mandate that everybody at UT Southwestern who falls within that envelope has been vaccinated, or has received an exception for an approved reason.

Dr. Podolsky:

So I'm delighted that that's where we are as a campus, but for those who may have loved ones or those who you are living with who are not vaccinated, I hope you'll encourage them to still take that step. So having said that, we do know that immune protection against any infection inevitably wanes with time, so booster doses are extremely important, too. Beyond vaccination, other nonpharmacologic measures like hand hygiene and masking, which you mentioned in the question, Jenny, continue to provide additional safeguards for those who are most vulnerable. And again, I think one will need to make that judgment for themselves. Navigating the new normal of COVID-19 requires each of us to learn to calibrate our own risk and adjust our behaviors based on the level of transmission in our community. So we encourage all employees at UT Southwestern to take the precautions that allows them to feel safe at work, and we respect those individual decisions.

Jenny Doren:

We are receiving more general campus questions. That's very nice to see as we move beyond the pandemic. One is seeking your vision for sustainability as a strategic initiative. What can you share?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I'm guessing that many of our community are not aware that UT Southwestern has a sustainability initiative, a Sustainability Committee with several guiding principles and goals. Among them are initiatives that optimize the use of our resources, increase the efficiency of operations, reduce emissions, and contribute meaningfully to protecting our environment. Some recent projects include a Styrofoam recycling pilot, which continues on North Campus with the help of volunteers. On that initiative, there are Styrofoam collection bins in the ND and NB loading docks. Others may have noticed new signage throughout the campus that more clearly identifies what can and cannot be recycled. And soon, you'll be finding more electric vehicle charging stations in the North Campus garage. We are also reengaging as we turn our attention from the pandemic to all the other important priorities of the campus.

Dr. Podolsky:

So we're reengaging our green champions who contribute ideas for improving the environmental health of our community, and also planning a quarterly campuswide sustainability newsletter, along with a revamped internal sustainability webpage, and an updated comprehensive sustainability policy. In general, our University focuses on four sustainability strategic initiatives. First, UT Southwestern serves the health of our community by implementing sustainability programs throughout our operations. Second, we support sustainability through our research, including green labs, recycling and energy, and water conservation. Third, we are continuously establishing near- and long-term programs and goals to lead sustainability efforts across the campus. And finally, and coming back to the question, UT Southwestern supports sustainability as an institutional priority. If any who are listening to this briefing have additional questions, you can forward those or email those to utsw.sustainability@utsouthwestern.edu. And we do welcome your ideas, because we know we can always do even better.

Jenny Doren:

Absolutely. Dr. Podolsky, with more people back on campus, some are wondering if there are any plans for employee discounts in the South Campus dining area, where they say food options seem more costly than elsewhere on campus.

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, we've taken a number of steps to contain costs in the South Campus food court in an effort to keep prices as low as possible for our customers. To come back to something that I commented upon in talking about our budget planning for next year, we know that there are significant inflationary costs that are impacting all of the operations on campus, including the food services there in the South Campus. So that's increases in both cost of food and in labor cost. As volumes return to normal in both the South Campus and North Campus food service areas, we expect that that will help alleviate some of the pressure that's driven some of those price increases. And we will continue to review our food and beverage prices to determine where there is an opportunity to moderate those, understanding that this is just one more example of pressure we're all feeling from the impact of inflation.

Jenny Doren:

To expand on that, I know we've had a lot of conversation about costs and pricing. A couple of parking-focused questions: first, has there been any consideration of reducing the price of parking?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I know it will not be a welcome answer to whoever posed the question, but no, at this point, we do not have plans to further reduce the cost of parking on campus. I will note that if an employee is working remotely and their position is coded as majority-remote, which means they're at home 80% of the time or more, they are eligible for a remote worker permit at a reduced rate of \$10 a month. I would refer anybody who would like to check up on any question or address a question regarding this to refer to the Remote Worker Parking Permit FAQ on the Parking Services website, and there are further details there.

Jenny Doren:

We're hearing that there are open parking spots in the North Campus garage, yet it is listed as full capacity. When will that change?

Dr. Podolsky:

Well, with the coming completion of the new Peter O'Donnell Jr. Brain Institute and Cancer Care Outpatient buildings and the garage that was part of that project, parking capacity issues will ease, I expect considerably, on the North Campus. And we expect additional spaces therefore to be available to staff who work in the North Campus buildings, and that garage will open this summer. Parking services does monitor garage usage regularly and grants access to employees based on a waitlist. If you wish to be added to the waitlist or check your spot in line, you can contact Parking Services by email at parkingservices@utsouthwestern.edu.

Jenny Doren:

So one final question for this briefing. Will there be any changes in vacation time for the new fiscal year? For the current fiscal year, some believe hours decreased compared to previous years. Is that true?

Dr. Podolsky:

In short, no, but I understand why it might appear so, so let me explain. But first, to address the first part of the question, there will be no changes in vacation time for the new fiscal year. Candidly, those are essentially always directed by the state as a state agency. And to come to this somewhat puzzling

apparent change in vacation-hour accrual, there are no changes in vacation hours accrued per month between this fiscal year and last. You may have, however, noticed a change in your total hours accrued. Those are a combination of vacation and "floating hours". Every year, the state provides us with a list of approved holidays for the upcoming fiscal year. The total number of holidays awarded to state employees fluctuates annually due to certain holidays sometimes falling on a Saturday or a Sunday.

Dr. Podolsky:

UT Southwestern has the flexibility to rearrange state holidays and designate certain days as "floating holidays" to give employees more flexibility in choosing their time off. Those hours are evenly distributed throughout the 12-month fiscal year and therefore have an impact on the total hours accrued monthly. And if that's still a little confusing, again, I come back to assure you the number of vacation hours and paid time off have not changed and will not change in the next year.

Jenny Doren:

Thank you for that clarification. It can be confusing, and we certainly appreciate your time this morning.

Dr. Podolsky:

Thank you, Jenny.