

Feb. 22, 2023 Briefing Transcript

Speaker 1: 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 campus update. Thank you for the questions that you've submitted since my last briefing. I'm pleased to know that these updates continue to be of interest and benefit so many members of our UT Southwestern community.

I'll start with what is almost now just a footnote in where we are in the evolving landscape of ongoing COVID-19 transmission and glad to say in a much better place than we have been, including even in the last month. So that our census, both on the campus and broadly within the region, is only 50% of what it was when I last provided an update. That means as of yesterday, 13 patients in Clements University Hospital and in the region, just about 3% of inpatient beds are being occupied by those being cared for COVID-19. I think I still want to remind all of us that COVID is still amongst us. So prudent measures to minimize your risk continue to be sensible for protecting yourself, your co-workers, and your loved ones at home. So with those few comments on that topic, let me turn to other UT Southwestern updates.

I want to address a matter which I am sure has come to the attention of many, if not just about everybody on campus as it's been covered in the media, and that is the announcement by our Gov. Greg Abbott about a plan to widen the ban of TikTok and other technologies on networks and devices, personal and state-owned, which are used to conduct state business. Our teams in Information Security, Legal Affairs, and Business Affairs continue to gain additional guidance from state officials and UT System leaders as we work to understand what this does mean for UT Southwestern specifically. So some of the answers we'd all like to have remain to be clarified by interactions with the Texas Department of Information Resources, or DIR.

In compliance with a directive by the governor, we have submitted a draft policy but have now to wait until DIR has reviewed and approved those policies so that we may then share them broadly on the campus and of course address any questions that may arise from those. So I appreciate everybody's patience and want to assure you this is very much front of mind for leadership in the key areas of the campus so that we can provide guidance to everybody.

I want to turn to another topic now that I know is of broad interest, and most especially within our Health System. As I shared last month, Dr. John Warner, our Executive Vice President for Health System Affairs and Health System CEO, is leaving UT Southwestern to take the leadership of The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center. With his coming departure, we have launched a national search to identify our next Executive Vice President for Health System Affairs. Given the importance of this search, I will be closely involved myself but have asked Dr. Andy Lee, Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, Provost, and Dean, to serve as a chair of the committee.

Until a replacement for Dr. Warner is identified, I will work directly with the outstanding leadership team across the Health System to be sure that we continue to provide the very best care possible to all those patients who give us the privilege of providing care to them and to ensure that we move forward on all of the important initiatives that are in progress across all of the sites at which we provide care. In

the months ahead, I look forward to keeping the UT Southwestern community apprised of updates on the search process. I am optimistic – in fact, confident – that given the momentum of UT Southwestern, the great care that is provided here, and the outstanding academic environment that we offer at UT Southwestern, that we'll attract some outstanding candidates and look forward to sharing that progress with you as a search progresses.

It is that season that we come to each year when we begin to look toward the next fiscal year. And in the days ahead, we will begin the process of formulating our budget for FY24, which I will remind you begins along with every other state agency on Sept. 1. The campus has been performing very well once again this year through the discipline and the commitment of our entire UT Southwestern community. That includes strong performance in our research programs, strong performance in our Health System, and very vibrant educational and training programs, as well as our efforts to commercialize the discoveries made at UT Southwestern so they get out into the world to benefit everyone.

Nonetheless, I think everybody listening to this update will know it's also a challenging environment; the impact of inflation has been considerable. And so I will say this year once again as I have in the past, in formulating our budget for FY24, we will have to be extremely disciplined, looking where we can to control our expenses and of course doing everything to drive our programs, which bring the revenue that enables us to do all of our important missions to support that overall institutional goal. I will look forward to working with the leadership across all departments of the campus to get to a budget that will support our ability to deliver on our mission and maintain the strength of UT Southwestern overall.

A key element of that will certainly be the outcome of the relatively recently begun 88th session of the Texas State Legislature. I can assure you that we are working closely with our state representatives to articulate the needs of UT Southwestern to continue to deliver what the state expects of us as an institution. I'm particularly grateful for the work of our Vice President for Government Relations, Angelica Marin Hill, who works closely with me both here and in Austin in making the case for investment in UT Southwestern.

Our primary priority this year, as I have mentioned in past briefings, is to see funding for our performance-based research operations formula. This is a funding mechanism that was begun two sessions ago and essentially has the state match and co-invest on this campus. When our research community is successful in growing its research endeavors through successfully competing for grants from the National Institutes of Health and for other funders of research. In addition, we are hoping that the Legislature will once again invest in the startup of our Peter O'Donnell Jr. School of Public Health. And if we ultimately are successful in getting these funding priorities included in the final budget, which will be known at the end of May when the session comes to a close, this will support our overall fiscal-year planning for FY24. So I will certainly keep you apprised of how much we progress in this process in Austin.

I'd like to take this opportunity to also recognize a number of individuals whose great contributions have gathered recognition more broadly than on our campus alone. First, I was very pleased that 11 of our nurses were named among the Dallas-Fort Worth Great 100 Nurses List. These individuals are compassionate caregivers who excel in both the art and science of nursing across all practice areas, both in the inpatient and outpatient settings, and serve as great role models and examples to their colleagues as well as a source of great comfort to their patients. Congratulations to these 11 and also to the leadership, which has made possible the standard of excellence of nursing, which is exemplified across every environment in which we provide care. That includes Dr. Susan Hernandez, our Chief Nursing Executive; and then Dr. David Wyatt; CNO for our University Hospital; Dr. Chris McLarty, CNO for our Ambulatory Services; and Christi Nguyen, our CNO for Nursing Excellence. So thanks to them and

congratulations to our nursing colleagues who are recognized this year as among the very best in this region.

I also will take note that we were named, UT Southwestern, to the *Forbes* list of Best Large Employers for 2023. That is defined as an employer with at least 5,000 employees. We were ranked No. 19 across the entire country among all large employers and No. 5 among all health care employers. I take particular gratification and satisfaction for us on this because this is based on employees being asked if they recommend UT Southwestern to friends and family and if there are any other employers that they would recommend. So, seeing that this reflects the sentiments of our own campus community is tremendously gratifying – as I've said – to see, and I thank all of those who work here at UT Southwestern who are the reason that we land at such a prominent place on this *Forbes* list.

Moving to our next topic: our Environmental Assessment Sustainability improvement, a topic I've raised in a few prior briefings. As everybody will be aware since my last briefing in January we faced yet another winter storm. And as I shared the message to the campus on Feb. 2, I want to again extend my sincere thanks to all of those who worked through the ice storm to keep the campus safe and keep essential operations going. But I will say this year's winter storm serves yet again as a reminder of the impact of the environment on our ability to continue the work of our institution.

As I mentioned last year, I believe we need to take stock of UT Southwestern's environmental impact and what we should be doing to increase our resilience to climate change to ensure minimal disruption to our services. In the years ahead, we can anticipate increased pressure from stakeholders, regulators, customers, employers, and our communities to evaluate and disclose how we are impacting the environment. As a means to prepare for and mitigate the impact of these changes as well as lessen the impact of our environmental footprint, I believe it is time for us to undertake a comprehensive assessment, and I'm pleased to announce that we have formalized a work group led by Holly Crawford, Executive Vice President for Business Affairs to help us with this assessment and the development of recommendations, which will help to inform a multiyear strategy. And I'm grateful for the other 17 colleagues from departments across the campus who've agreed to serve along with Holly Crawford to define that impact and also the means for us to mitigate that and to redouble our resilience to some of the challenges that we are seeing as exemplified by these now-annual winter storms. That work group is kicking off its work tomorrow, and I've asked that it conclude its work and forward recommendations by the end of this fiscal year. So that would be the end of August. And of course, I will be sharing those with the campus at that time.

Also, another matter, which is a seasonal one that I come to at this point each year that I'll take advantage of this update to highlight, is the requirement for conflict of interest statements for 2023 to be submitted by March 1. Appropriate disclosure and management of financial interests and outside activities are vital to protecting UT Southwestern's reputation for excellence and really is essential for maintaining the public trust. So each year, UT Southwestern faculty members, researchers, and medical students – excuse me – employees must complete a COI, Conflict of Interest Statement of Financial Interests. All of those who do have a responsibility to file those should certainly be aware by now; if not do ask that you contact the COI Office at conflictofinterest@utsouthwestern.edu for guidance on how to complete that disclosure in a timely fashion.

I will also note that voting begins in the annual *U.S. News* ranking of top clinical programs, something we've taken pride in for now several years in the opportunity it has provided to highlight the excellence of the work and the care provided at UT Southwestern. I thank all of you who are involved in providing that care or support it, and the leaders who have made UT Southwestern the No. 1 ranked hospital in DFW and the No. 2 hospital in Texas for the past six years. Voting in this year's rankings around the country should be available to all eligible physicians by the end of next week. Board-certified physicians

and 15 adult and 10 pediatric specialties who are registered Doximity users can vote and influence these rankings, which patients tell us inform their health care decision-making. Even if you do not receive an email from Doximity, you can vote by logging in to doximity.com or using the Doximity app. If you haven't already done so, you have until the end of the survey period in mid-March to claim your profile, and certainly would encourage you to learn more about this survey as you make a decision whether to then contribute your opinions to its outcomes.

Finally, I'd like to invite everybody to join the Rare Disease Team for UT Southwestern Day at the Dallas Zoo this Saturday, Feb. 25. In addition to discounted tickets, there will be a group photo at 11 a.m. by the zebra exhibit. Zebras play a featured role in helping UT Southwestern elevate awareness of rare disease research and treatment. The event is open to all UT Southwestern employees, students, faculty, families, and friends, and you can learn more about this and find a link to purchase tickets by visiting the UTSW events calendar page on the internet. And with that, I'll conclude my update and turn to Jenny Doren, as I have on each of these briefings for your questions.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, good morning, Dr. Podolsky. I always appreciate this opportunity. Our first question is a timely one that's generating quite a bit of interest on campus. Can you please address how Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's recent warning to state agency and public university leaders regarding the use of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives will affect UT Southwestern efforts?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, the essence of the governor's directive is to remind all of the state agencies that as we pursue our initiatives in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion, that we need to follow all legal requirements in our hiring practices. And so we are in compliance with those as a matter of principle anyway, as we comply with all applicable laws that are relevant to the things that we do at UT Southwestern and we'll ensure that indeed all our practices do comply as we believe they do with those legal requirements.

This does not in any way deflect us from our commitment to doing everything we can do to make sure that UT Southwestern embraces and supports an environment and the values and principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion, which allows us to make this a place where everybody can contribute to the mission to their greatest degree possible. And that is across the continuum of everything that goes on at UT Southwestern. So I hope that clarifies what I'm sure has been a matter that there's been great interest and concern to understand.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, thank you very much for that. Our next question was seeking an update on the Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Initiatives Committee, which I know you've already addressed, will have its first meeting tomorrow. So unless there's anything more to mention regarding that I'm going to skip ahead to a related question, which is, elaborating on UT Southwestern's recycling program specifically including the Health System, if there's anything you can say about that.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Yes, glad to elaborate on that as a relevant extension to the overall topic that will be addressed by the work group that I've described already. As an institution, we do have several initiatives to optimize the use of resources, increase the efficiency of operations, reduce emissions, and contribute meaningfully to the stewardship of the environment. About a year ago, some may remember that I mentioned that we placed new signage throughout the campus that more clearly identifies what can and cannot be

recycled. While we do not have a traditional blue bin recycling process within our hospitals, we do recycle many items including all cardboard boxes from deliveries, all cooking oil from our nutrition services operations, and all damaged linen from patient rooms. I also shared in the past our Styrofoam recycling pilot, which continues on North Campus. Through the efforts of volunteers, there is a Styrofoam collection bin in the ND loading dock for those who are interested in joining in.

And in general, our University focuses on four 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 campus, hence the work group I did speak about already in this briefing. And finally, UT Southwestern supports sustainability as an institutional priority. I do want to acknowledge the work that is carried out by our Facilities staff under the leadership of Vice President Juan Guerra and also under the leadership of Bruce Brown in our Business Continuity and Disaster Recovery Group here at UT Southwestern.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Thank you. Now, to a couple of infectious diseases-related questions. Any update on if and when we will continue to ease masking protocols in the Health System?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

We are closely monitoring trends in COVID-19-related hospitalization across the region and including on our campus and in our hospitals, while also relying on guidance from our Infection Prevention and Infectious Diseases and Geographic Medicine experts. While we remain reassured by the sustained decrease in community transmission, and I've touched on that of course in my initial comments this morning, we also recognize that beyond the case of COVID-19, we are not out of respiratory virus season, at least not yet. And patients and their families frequently tell us that they appreciate the added safeguards we have in place here at UT Southwestern.

Our plan, for now, is to continue requiring faculty, staff, learners, and trainees to wear a mask when in direct patient-care interactions such as in an examination room in the clinics or a patient room in our hospitals. Masking remains optional for patients and their families. We do maintain a few exceptions, including areas where patients may be especially vulnerable like our Bone Marrow Transplant unit or our Transplant Clinic where there's a higher requirement for masking for all those who are in those areas, including visitors and guests. And that said, I will add that we are considering easing masking guidelines further once flu season concludes typically by mid-next month or early April. That's assuming cases of COVID-19 are also staying down when we come to the point of considering taking that measure. We're also communicating with peers at other academic medical centers across the nation and sharing best practices, which will help inform our own decision-making.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Can you also provide an update on the latest strain of COVID-19 XBB.1.5 that we discussed last month? Since then, some people have raised new concerns about symptoms being more severe. Have we seen any evidence of that here at UT Southwestern?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

As this latest strain has become more prevalent in our region, and we're seeing that in the sequencing of positive samples continuing to be carried out by our laboratories here, we are not seeing more patients

presenting with more severe symptoms compared to earlier phases of the pandemic. However, some individuals who previously avoided infection are contracting COVID-19 for the first time; and therefore this is their first real experience with the symptoms of the virus. So that can get a somewhat confounding impression anyway.

Just to emphasize this strain, XBB.1.5, now makes up about 80% of the new COVID-19 infections nationwide and, nearly that 75% or so here in Texas. Some of the early telltale signs of COVID-19, like temporary loss of taste and smell are seen less commonly with this variant. Symptoms typically range from cough and congestion to some shortness of breath, fever, chills, fatigue, muscle aches, sore throat, nausea or vomiting, and in some instances, diarrhea. As with any virus, symptoms do vary from person to person and typically last five to seven days. And while early data shows XBB is spreading easier, it does not seem to cause more severe disease, to come back to the initial thrust of the question.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Well, that's good news there. Shifting now to Business Affairs, we have two capital improvement project-related questions. First, can you provide an update on the Bass complex and when demolition is expected?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, the preparation for the demolition, as in bringing the buildings down, is continuing. The demolition process itself is already in process in terms of taking many elements from within the interiors of the building out in anticipation of an implosion later in the fall of this year. So teams are focusing currently on the building's interior infrastructure and then working their way outward. They started by prepping the BP and BL buildings and expect to commence interior prep work for the BK Building by April. Demolition steps have also begun for the demolition of the Bass Center garage. And so we are targeting the fall of 2023, likely October, for a grand implosion of all those buildings when the time comes.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Is there any update on when and where a new administrative complex might be built?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

The short answer to that is not yet. In moving programs from the Bass complex to lease sites, we did engage in leases that will last several years to give us the flexibility to ultimately decide what is the best plan for supporting these very important administrative functions. But we are actively beginning to explore what different options there may be. It's also a matter of deciding whether it's in the best interest of the University to continue to lease versus to invest the capital to build new buildings for these. So I will certainly be glad to share the evolving plan as we get to some conclusions in that. But for those who are interested, be assured this is very much on the radar screen, so to speak.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Now to parking, specifically Garage D at Clements University Hospital. Some staff are expressing frustration over finding a parking spot even when arriving well in advance of their shift. What's being done to address this?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Well, I appreciate the question, understanding this is a real source of frustration. And at least as a start, if it's at least a small comfort, we are aware of the problem and are actively working to address it. Some have inquired of more levels to be added to the garage. Currently, we've reviewed multiple options to serve as overflow parking locations, both on-site and off-site options as we have done in the past when we've needed to accommodate construction projects, including for example, when we were constructing the third tower of Clements. And we just recognize that parking can become tight, particularly around shift changes, and that is where our efforts are focused when looking for additional spaces.

I wish I had a more definitive answer for you this morning, we don't. But we are working on it and we'll certainly communicate those changes and ways to address this issue as soon as we find what we believe would be a sensible solution that would truly be helpful to our employees who are experiencing this frustration.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

Thank you. Our final question for this briefing, and I, of course, want to encourage people to continue submitting questions, builds off of some of what we discussed during our last briefing when you spoke about new lunch options in the Professional Office Building. Are there any plans for more affordable menu choices in the Brookriver Building, perhaps with an employee discount included?

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

So I am pleased to share that we have plans to add a nutrition cafe at our Empire Central location, which is adjacent to Brookriver and should be easily accessible by foot for our Brookriver colleagues. This offering should be available this spring. Once construction is completed, we'll share more details about the menu options and costs as details are finalized in the coming months. But certainly, those decisions will incorporate the concerns of the person who has submitted these questions to be sure that those working at Brookriver as well as Empire Central do have appealing and affordable choices.

Speaker 2: Jenny Doren:

And thank you very much, Dr. Podolsky.

Speaker 1: Dr. Podolsky:

Thank you, Jenny.