

My name is Dr. Taryn Papandria, and I am the medical director of the emergency department and current medical staff president at Hancock Regional Hospital, and I have been an emergency medicine physician for 17 years. I have dedicated the past 15 years of my career to trying to save the lives and ensure the health and wellness of the citizens of Hancock County, and in the past year and a half I have evaluated and treated hundreds of patients that have had the misfortune to become infected with COVID-19. I have witnessed firsthand the devastating effects that COVID has had on patients, their families, and the health care system.

At the beginning of the pandemic, many of us in healthcare had a sense of fear and helplessness as we knew very little about the virus, we had very few options for treatment, and there was no vaccine to protect us from contracting the virus from our patients. Those feelings have now turned into feelings of frustration and extreme sadness because although we now have a vaccine that could have halted the spread of the virus, there are still so many people who have made the willful decision to not protect themselves and others, and we seem to be no better off than we were last year. The physical and emotional toll that this pandemic has had on healthcare workers has caused many to leave direct patient care positions or the health care industry altogether. In the past month alone, we have seen a dramatic increase in COVID cases and hospitalizations, and I assure you that it is as bad as it has ever been.

The data from hospitals around the country as well as here locally is showing us that greater than 90% of the patients admitted to the hospital with COVID and nearly 100% of those requiring ICU care or who are on ventilators are unvaccinated. This is putting a tremendous burden on our health care system which is already functioning at or near capacity and is experiencing unprecedented workforce shortages. This is affecting our ability to take care of all patients, not just those with COVID. When all of our beds are full and we do not have enough staff to take care of our patients, elective surgeries get cancelled, patients wait in the emergency department for hours and sometimes days waiting to get admitted or transferred to another hospital, patients with life threatening conditions such as heart attacks and strokes cannot get to the level of care that they need, and it prevents us from being able to give all of our patients the care they deserve.

We in Hancock County and central Indiana have been rather fortunate in that while we have had a significant number of COVID cases and deaths from the virus, we have not been as heavily impacted as many parts of the country. In many states in which the vaccination rates are low, there are no ICU beds available in the state and patients are having to be transferred hundreds of miles and sometimes states away to get the care that they need. The reason we have had a better experience than others is because of the collaboration between the hospital, the county health department, and our community leaders, and we have always followed the science and heeded the advice of the medical experts. While a good portion of the county has been vaccinated, I assure you that our healthcare system is at a pivotal point and can quickly become overwhelmed if more is not done to stop the spread of this virus.

The time for vaccine hesitancy and skepticism must end. The Pfizer vaccine has received FDA approval, and the other vaccines are likely soon to follow. The vaccines were trialed in tens of

thousands of people before ever being distributed to the general public and millions around the world have now been vaccinated, myself and my family included. The rates of serious side effects from the COVID vaccines are miniscule compared to the number of people who have already been vaccinated, and the side effects of the vaccine are far less than the potential complications of a severe COVID infection. Even with the Delta variant, the vaccines still have a high percentage of preventing infection from COVID. It is true that no vaccine is 100% effective, and we are beginning to see some waxing immunity due to the Delta variant; however, the data is clear that even if a vaccinated person does become infected their risk of severe infection is significantly less.

We are all in agreement that COVID-19 will never be eradicated and will become another endemic virus that we will continue to manage. It is not a question of if someone will get infected with the virus but when. What everyone must understand is that while we have come a long way in our treatment protocols of COVID-19, there is no treatment that has been proven to work for everyone and there is no guarantee that we will be able to save a person's life if they do become infected, especially if they are unvaccinated. An ounce of prevention (the vaccine) is truly worth a pound of cure.

I understand that that the decision to receive the COVID vaccine should be a personal choice; however, it sometimes becomes necessary to make mandates if a person's personal choice may put others at risk, such as in the case of drunk driving or smoking ordinances in public places. If you are unvaccinated, please consider the consequences of your decision both for yourself if you do become infected and for all of those in your community if our health care system becomes even more overwhelmed. People must stop viewing requests to get the vaccine and other risk mitigation tactics as an attack on their civil liberties and must instead view it as their civic duty to do what is best for the greater good of society. Those who choose to remain unvaccinated for any reason other than legitimate medical exemptions are, in my opinion, making the most selfish choice possible, and are putting the lives of themselves and others at risk. We will continue to suffer financially, economically, socially, educationally, and medically until enough people become vaccinated or get infected to achieve herd immunity, and I guarantee that our healthcare infrastructure cannot survive the achievement of herd immunity through more infections of unvaccinated people

As a healthcare professional in this community, I am urging you to get vaccinated and to do your part to put an end to this pandemic. If your choice is to remain unvaccinated, then please wear a mask in public spaces and avoid high risk behaviors so that hopefully my colleagues and I will never have to meet you in a professional capacity.

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