

Overwhelmed

We're overwhelmed, and all I can feel is anger and frustration.

Anger at our citizens who have decided the precautions that stemmed the tide of this pandemic are no longer necessary, while we see new cases rise alarmingly in the region, to the point where our hospital resources are at a breaking point. I want to strike out at anyone I see not masking in a public place, astonished anyone with a conscience can be so knowingly callous to endangering the lives of others.

Anger also at state officials who have absolved themselves of any responsibility for requiring adherence to lifesaving mandates, leaving decisions to local officials who are powerless to confront the vocal minority who have violently threatened those local citizen officials.

And frustration at local health officials who decided last month, just as cases were beginning to rise, that all they could do is throw up their hands and allow a free for all by removing restrictions, forced by the small but vocal part of the population who would threaten the health of all for their personal definition of freedom.

And especially anger at the attitude of many in the legislature who have gone so far as introducing bills to prohibit mask mandates locally, and would prohibit the executive branch from dealing with emergencies.

And anger at those misguided, arrogant people who would violently protest at local officials homes, endangering city council and health board member's families, an obscene act of intimidation. They have prevented our state and local officials from continuing and enforcing mandates, costing lives and accelerating the suffering. In the face of such intimidation, our local Health Board saw no alternative except to back down.

And still the cases increase, debilitating already exhausted nurses and therapists and physicians doing their damnedest to provide care in an untenable situation.

After donning PPE last week I walked into a room of a 40's year old school teacher, on the vent with post Covid ARDS, lungs turning to scar tissue, suffocating, kept alive only by being under general anesthesia for weeks. I found his elementary class had made a new huge poster telling him they loved him, missed him and to get well, surrounded by individual pictures drawn by the students. Fortunately I was in the room by myself when I wept for those students who would likely lose their teacher, and a family deprived of father and husband.

It didn't have to happen. None of this had to happen.

At a time when we should be celebrating that this journey and tribulation can be over soon, we are instead facing our darkest days.

We have all seen the statistics. Eastern Idaho Covid cases are up 50% since a mask mandate was lifted February 8, and Bonneville County now exceeds Ada County in daily cases, with only one-fourth the population, while Boise still accepts a mask mandate. Some days Bonneville County has accounted for one-half the state's total cases. Four more counties in Eastern Idaho have case increases that would have mandated mask orders under the previous Health Board plan.

Bonneville County's case rate has ranged from 40 to 45 active cases per 10,000 population, and under the previous health plan 45 cases would have been labeled "critical risk" requiring lockdown. Instead we can only suggest people mask and distance and avoid gatherings.

Consider the situation at EIRMC where I work. Today we have 30 patients in the ICU, with a capacity of 29 patients, overflowing to other areas, with 10 to 12 of those Covid patients, a total of 30 hospitalized Covids, and a total of 250 inpatients, a number that exceeds our staffing ability on the floors. Other hospitals can close, but as the regional center we care for the sickest patients and do everything in our power to avoid transferring. That includes having our administrative staff and charge nurses take patients, instead of providing the guidance and leadership our younger nurses so need and deserve. And we ask nurses to work 18 hour shifts, often then off 8 hours and return for another 18 hour shift, and while working care for more patients than advisable. We have respiratory therapists, normally full time in the ICU, rushing between

the floors and ICU, so short are we on respiratory therapists. If the situation worsens, we will have no choice but to transfer patients—covid and non-covid—to out of area hospitals that are not overwhelmed.

Always a scarce resource, the shortage of skilled nursing, respiratory and other therapists precedes Covid, but the demand over the past year country-wide has brought to a standstill our ability to recruit permanent and temporary staff. There are no other nurses or therapists to be had. Administration has tried to be inventive with bonuses and other incentives but we currently have open positions for 22 ICU nurses with little hope of filling those spots.

But our staff perseveres, though the toll in exhaustion and pent up anger at the unwillingness of the public to help incurs resentment and cynicism. We tend to be a jaded bunch, we ICU workers, but the tenderness, the compassion, the caring our staff has managed to maintain is the most awe-inspiring demonstration of true humanity I have ever been privileged to witness.

So please, please help. This terrible journey will end, but help us prevent further death and illness by holding on just a little longer. By late April we will begin vaccinating the general public, and by summer hopefully return to some semblance of normality, but in the meantime lives are being lost unnecessarily, and those deaths are preventable.

Even if you have reservations about the efficacy of masking and distancing and avoiding large groups please help. Please adhere, and use your influence to encourage others to do so. We can stem this new tide of deaths, but we all must help. Please, please consider our beleaguered hospital staff who have sacrificed so much over the past year. Help them through the end of this pandemic without more unnecessary suffering.

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