Oregon Physicians Sound Alarm and Support Urgent Action to Control Surge of COVID-19 Cases

For Immediate Release
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Oregon has had strong leadership and guidance from our Governor and the Oregon Health Authority during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to timely action to promote and protect public health at the outset of the pandemic, thousands of lives have been saved in our state.

As the pandemic surges back due to the highly contagious Delta variant, our organizations, which collectively represent more than 4,700 health care professionals practicing in this state, urge strong action again to protect public health (Oregon Chapter American College of Physicians; Oregon Chapter American College of Emergency Physicians; Oregon Pediatric Society; Oregon Academy Of Family Physicians). We agree with and applaud the Governor’s new health and public safety rule for testing or proof of vaccination for employees in health care settings which is scheduled to start September 30. This is an important step toward containing the spread of the Delta variant.

We believe additional action is needed to achieve the urgent and important aim of stopping the Delta variant from causing severe illness among Oregon’s front-line health care workers and spreading to patients.

As recent hospitalization trends show, containing the spread of Delta is urgent. As of August 12, 682 COVID-19 patients are hospitalized in Oregon, including 180 hospitalized in ICU beds and 81 on ventilators. Our hospitals have not seen these levels of severe illness from COVID-19 before, even in prior peak months of the pandemic. Hospitals, emergency rooms, and skilled nursing facilities are full - with limited capacity for additional patients. Overflow patients with COVID-like symptoms from these hospital and nursing facilities are now being diverted to primary care and urgent care clinics which are understaffed and struggling to meet the need as well as continue to care for their chronically ill patients. The surge is expected to get worse and staffing is already challenged.

Given the circumstances, the urgency of protecting the health of front-line health care workers and reducing spread from health care workers to others is more important than ever. Therefore, we strongly recommend the Oregon Health Authority implement the Governor’s new rule requiring weekly COVID-19 testing or proof of vaccination immediately, while still holding to the September 30 date before lack of compliance will be penalized. Delaying action until the end of September puts front-line health care workers at risk and jeopardizes the ability of our health care infrastructure to meet the demands of caring for Oregon’s rising tide of COVID-19 patients.

Just as the surge in COVID-19 cases should prompt us to swiftly protect the health of front-line health care workers, it should prompt us to protect the health of all Oregonians. We support the use of masks in public indoor settings as recommended by the CDC. Mask mandates have proven effective at reducing new cases and deaths from COVID-19. Given surging cases throughout the state, we agree with Governor Brown’s resumption this week of the statewide mask mandate in indoor public spaces.
Finally, we agree with Governor Brown’s statement that the Oregon Legislature should act promptly to address state law that currently prohibits employers from independently mandating vaccines for health care workers (ORS 433.416) and first responders (433.407).\(^8,9\) Health systems in other states have been able to use mandates to increase vaccination uptake and reduce spread of disease in health care settings. We urge our legislators and other stakeholders to amend or repeal the prohibition on vaccine mandates for health care workers and first responders during the 2022 legislative session, if not sooner.

Because the health care professionals that we represent, continue to care for patients on the front lines of the COVID-19 pandemic, the leadership of our organizations appreciate the opportunity to provide input on public policy issues that affect our patients and our profession. We recognize that these measures may not be popular. We hope this show of broad physician and health care professionals’ support braces our public health officials and politicians who must take action now to protect Oregonians.

Oregon Chapter American College of Physicians represents more than 1800 internal medicine physicians, residents and medical students across Oregon, all working to improve the health of our patients and communities. Please visit [www.acponline.org/chapters](http://www.acponline.org/chapters) or inquire to [oregonacp@comcast.net](mailto:oregonacp@comcast.net).

Since 1972, the Oregon Chapter American College of Emergency Physicians has advocated on behalf of the board-certified Emergency Physicians working in the state of Oregon. We are a state-based Chapter affiliated with the American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP). [www.oregonacep.org](http://www.oregonacep.org)

The Oregon Pediatric Society, the state Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, stands with the worldwide public health community in support of COVID vaccinations for all medically eligible and face masking to control severe illness and deaths during the pandemic. [www.oregonpediatricsociety.org](http://www.oregonpediatricsociety.org)

The Oregon Academy of Family Physicians is a membership organization for more than 1700 physicians, residents, and medical students across the state who provide primary care for Oregonians. The OAFP advocates for sustainable, equitable health care in our communities; connects members with each other and to their sense of purpose; and inspires lifelong learning in the current and future generations of family doctors. [www.oafp.org](http://www.oafp.org)

6. [https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01394-0](https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-01394-0)
8. [https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_433.416](https://oregon.public.law/statutes/ors_433.416)