

“Younger, sicker, quicker”: Doctors plead for vaccinations as US hospitals fill with young patients

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As the Delta variant of coronavirus continues to overwhelm the globe, a growing number of young people in their twenties, thirties, and forties are being intubated and succumbing to the virus, particularly in the poorest states in the Southern United States where vaccination numbers are the lowest. The phrase now used by doctors to explain this new stage of the pandemic is “younger, sicker, quicker.”

With many states breaking infection records daily, Florida is the epicenter of the crisis in the South. On Saturday, Florida reported 23,903 new cases of COVID-19 in a 24-hour period, raising the state’s total number of cases to 2,725,450. The Florida Hospital Association reported a record high for the state’s hospitalization rates, with 13,348 patients hospitalized as of Saturday.

According to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), more than 80 percent of people between 65 to 74 are fully vaccinated, but the figure is less than half of that for ages 18 to 39. Across the South, cases are skyrocketing and the trends are toward a lower age group—particularly among those ages 18-49, who now make up 50 percent of all cases.

Doctors and healthcare staff throughout the region are pleading for the population to get vaccinated. Compared to an earlier time in the pandemic when the majority of deaths were among the elderly, health care staff are seeing large numbers of young people in the prime of lives, often parents with young children, succumbing to the virus.

Dr. Brytney Cobia of Grandview Medical Center in Birmingham, Alabama made an appeal in a Facebook post, stating that “One of the last things they do before being intubated is beg me for the vaccine,” Cobia wrote. “I take them by the hand and tell them I’m sorry, but it’s too late. A few days later, when I call the time of death, I hug [their] family members and tell them that the best way to honor your loved one is to get vaccinated and encourage everyone you know to do the same.”

In disbelief at their loss, Cobia stated that patients and

their families explain to her the various reasons that discouraged them from taking a vaccine: “They tell me they didn’t know. They thought it was a hoax. They thought it was political. They thought that because they had a certain blood type or a certain skin color, they would not get as sick. They thought it was ‘just the flu.’ But they were wrong. And they wish they could go back. But cannot.”

Alabama and Mississippi have the lowest vaccination rates in the nation with only 35 percent of residents fully vaccinated against COVID-19, according to data from Johns Hopkins.

In another powerful statement, Dr. Michael Bolding at Arkansas’ premier Washington Regional Medical Center recently made an impassioned plea in a Facebook video to beg Arkansas residents to get vaccinated, describing the conditions faced in the hospitals. “Recently I’ve seen a dramatic rise in twenty-year-olds and thirty-year-olds, unvaccinated patients, who are not coming in to the ER requiring a little bit of oxygen and being hospitalized for a day or two, but younger healthier patients with no comorbidities ending up on ventilators, BiPAP, high flow oxygen and extremely sick.

“I have had to call multiple mothers and fathers of preschoolers in their 20s and 30s and tell them that their spouse may not survive this hospital stay. I cannot explain in words the fatigue that your local hospital providers have right now.

“What I really wish you could see, is to look into the eyes of a young father or a gentleman who knows that they may be short for this world because they didn’t get their vaccine, and the regret and remorse on their face—and fear. I can’t show you, I can’t describe, it will certainly be with me forever, but that look on a patient’s face would be more motivating than anything to go ahead and get your vaccine if you have not already.”

Scott Harris, chief executive of the Alabama Department of Public Health told the *Washington Post*, “We find that

there's a lot of mistrust with messages that come from state government, from public health, in particular, from the media," he said. "It's just a multilayered problem. There's just a lot of different people who have a lot of different reasons for not getting the vaccine. And it's just hard to address them in a big way."

In Tulsa, Oklahoma, Dr. Ryan Parker, chief of emergency medicine for Saint Francis Health System, told the *Tulsa World*, "I've had a lot of 'I was going to wait and see what it did for other people,' '(see) if other people had side effects,' or 'there are too many unknowns.'"

"My youngest patient is 20 years old. So 20s to 50s is a very common age group right now, which is very scary," added Dr. Kamran Abbasi. "It breaks my heart. We've got people coming to the ER, and I'm admitting them to the hospital. They realize this is worse than they thought it was going to be—whatever perception they had of COVID was incorrect. Now they're here and they feel horrible and they're terrified."

Dr. Mike Angelidis, chair of Saint Francis' hospitalist services and chief of internal medicine, stressed, "There is so much 'wait and see,'" and confusion about side effects with regards to the vaccine. "What I try to tell patients is that this is different than any other vaccine we've had in a lot of ways, and one of those ways is the widespread use of it. There is so much research and data on these vaccines. But they already have these ideas about it ... Where are they getting their information from, and why are they so scared? It's very frustrating."

In addition to the impassioned pleas from frontline doctors and healthcare workers, a growing number of parents who have lost their children are speaking out.

Christy Carpenter of Alabama lost her 28-year-old son Curt, who was also unvaccinated. She told the *Washington Post* that her family had not received the vaccine because they had concerns about how soon it was rolled out. She said her son was healthy prior to catching the virus, and that he initially believed the pandemic to be a "hoax." She said his last words were: "This is not a hoax, this is real."

In St. Louis, Missouri, Kimberle Jones lost her 37-year-old daughter Erica Thompson, who was a mother to three boys, ages 8, 11 and 17, now orphaned. "I just watched my baby slipping away from me every day," Jones told KCRG News. Thompson was in the hospital for a total of 50 days. She died July 4. "The doctor basically called and told me that she got to go on the ventilator or she's going to die," Jones said.

"My daughter was not vaccinated and I really do believe, I really do believe had she been vaccinated that she'd still be here with me today," Jones added.

Father of five, Michael Freedy, 39, contracted the virus

after going on holiday with his fiancée Jessica DuPreez. He died in hospital, where he was placed on a ventilator, on July 29. Freedy sent DuPreez a heartbreaking message before dying of COVID-19 in hospital: "I should have got that damn vaccine." Freedy leaves behind five children—the youngest of them just 17 months old.

In Los Angeles, 34-year-old Stephen Harmon died July 21 from COVID-19 just weeks after expressing his opposition to taking the vaccine. Dr. Oren Friedman, who treats COVID-19 patients at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, told KCBS-TV the hospital has seen a tenfold increase in COVID-19 admissions, and that "Virtually every single person that is getting sick enough to be admitted to the hospital has not been vaccinated."

"I can tell you that for the respiratory therapists and nurses and doctors that are having to go into rooms and take care of patients who are this sick at this stage—and to know that it's preventable if people simply had taken the vaccine—it is an awful feeling of PTSD and frustration," Friedman added.

The influx of young people admitted to hospitals includes not only adults, but large numbers of children, still too young to get vaccinated. For the week ending July 29, the American Academy of Pediatrics reported an 84 percent increase in new COVID-19 cases among children. Numerous hospitals have reported a large number of admissions of children and youth, with dozens in intensive care units and on ventilators.

The British medical journal *The Lancet* recently reported that 1.5 million children have been orphaned in the pandemic. The current deaths are even more tragic as the virus is cutting down young people and parents of young children in the prime of their life.



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