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City-Cowley County
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April 28, 2021

A Message from the Public Health Officer

COVID-19 Update to the Community

The ongoing response to the COVID-19 Pandemic never fails to twist and turn. When the noise of network media spills over causing anxiety and fear our job in public health gets more and more difficult. Over the past several weeks it seems that we have been bombarded with news about viral variants, new outbreaks, problems with vaccine, directions on when to wear masks and more. It is exhausting.

Today I want to take some time to detail where exactly we are in Cowley County as it pertains to our ongoing struggle against the SARS-CoV2 virus and variations of the virus.

New Variant Strain Arrives in Cowley County:

Two weeks ago, the Health Department was notified from the Kansas Health & Environment Laboratory (KHEL) that a test sample collected from a local Cowley County resident who was symptomatic returned a positive result for COVID-19. In and of itself, that result was not uncommon, what was uncommon was the genotype of the virus was one of the “variants” that have been recently found to be spreading. This variant P.1 is commonly referred to as the “Brazilian” variant. Since the first case was discovered in our county two (2) more cases have been reported. None of the individuals who have taken ill have any common connection (friend, family, social, work, school) and it is believed that the exposures and illness contraction likely are related to personal activities inside or outside of our communities.

We know that there is risk to contract all kinds of illness especially when we travel or interact outside of our normal environments. What we do not know currently is this: Is the variant P.1 starting to spread widely in the County? Will the vaccines that we have be effective and protect us against the variant strains of the virus? To help us find the answers to these questions the KHEL has offered to help.

This Saturday, May 1, 2021 is the date of the Cowley County Annual Health & Safety Fair. The fair this year is being held in the Agra-business Building in Arkansas City. The fair has become a wonderful annual spring event and is visited by many local and area residents who can come out to learn about all the health and safety services and wellness opportunities locally available to them. Attendance is generally between 500 – 800 people (some years more) that visit over the 3 hours that the fair is held (9 AM – Noon).

As a kind of last-minute addition, I am asking for help from KHEL and from you. We will be hosting a COVID-19 testing event at the fair. KHEL lab staff bring a mobile testing unit to our fair and will collect saliva samples for test analysis to help determine if we are facing a growing risk for this new virus variant. To reward people for taking some time to be tested KDHE will be awarding a \$25 gift card to the first 100 people tested (limit 1 card per family) that will be distributed by the Health Department on behalf of KHEL. (As I mentioned this testing plan has come together quickly and as such, we are waiting on the gift cards that were ordered and will arrive next week for us to distribute to the people tested Saturday). There is a special condition to this, however. If you don’t feel well, we want you to be tested BUT we will not welcome you into the exhibition hall area of the H&S fair. If you are not well please be tested, then go straight home and rest and isolate. Don’t spread any illness to others – please! If you need a private appointment for a test call us at the Health Department and we will help you.

Vaccine Updates:

The current COVID-19 vaccines do not cause COVID-19. You cannot develop the illness because none of the vaccines contain the virus. It is medically impossible. The current vaccines do not contain a microchip. The current vaccines have proven themselves to be effective at stopping the spread of COVID-19 by allowing the human

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immune system to recognize the spike protein that encases the active virus and eliminate that spike protein before the virus can infect the host.

The current vaccines are a modern medical marvel, but they were not simply developed in a single laboratory. The background for vaccine development has taken nearly two decades.

In the early 2000's SARS first became known to mankind. It was infectious but not spread easily and thus able to be contained. SARS still exists two decades later (interesting). MERS came along a few years later, this coronavirus was extremely troubling as it was highly fatal, again it did not spread easily. The MERS virus is still active in the world (there is a pattern here). Fast forward to late 2019 and the arrival of SARS-CoV2.

Research was done to identify the SARS virus genomes and develop countermeasures against them (vaccines). For nearly 20 years that research was ongoing. Virologists could identify the different strains, and all agreed that they knew how to develop a vaccine to provide human immunity. However, since illness was not widespread vaccine development did not occur. SARS-CoV2 was the gamechanger, it was virulent and insidious. When SARS-CoV2 became a pandemic and effected the population of the world our nation cleared the regulatory hurdles to bring a vaccine into mass production and make them available to the population. The major problem with a rush to dispense new vaccine is clear. You don't have as much time (years) to study the vaccine and test groups before you make it widely available because people are sick and dying. Instead you weigh the risks of contracting the illness versus that of taking a vaccine that is newly developed. Along the way side-effects that were not known about due to limited clinical human trials may appear and when they do they need to be rapidly studied and analyzed. That is where we are today.

The fact remains that since the new vaccines have become available and been administered, we have seen a drastic reduction in new COVID-19 cases (approximately 80%) locally. That is not coincidental, and thankfully it has nothing to do with politics.

The Health Department since January 2021 has administered over 7000 doses of COVID-19 vaccine to local residents. Nearly 4,000 people have been fully vaccinated through the health department alone. In Cowley County there are several other health care partners (hospitals, clinics, physicians, and pharmacies) that have also provided numerous vaccine doses.

It is reported that more than 11,500 Cowley County residents have had at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine. It is estimated that 26,500 people in the county were eligible to receive the vaccine (excludes children and other high-risk individuals) meaning that there are likely 15,000 people who are eligible to be vaccinated that are choosing not to be. Sadly, that is why we continue to see the virus remain active in Cowley County.

While the infection rate is down during the current month (April 2021) we still find on average one new case of COVID-19 every day. A year ago, we only had one case in the entire month of April. What our daily infection and rates show us is that the virus is still here and still very much active and still being spread person to person.

The arrival of a new variant and what that means is yet to be learned. Last year we only could tell you, stay home, wash your hands, wear a mask. Today we can stop the virus but only if you develop immunity, to do that you must either get sick and survive or be vaccinated. That is the decision that you individually need to make. The longer it takes to achieve community immunity the longer the pandemic will continue.

Johnson & Johnson Vaccine:

After a two week pause in the administration of the vaccine it is again being offered. The ten (10) cases of severe adverse effects that resulted in blood clots (thrombosis) being formed have been closely studied and reviewed. It has been determined that this serious side effect will be warned of to all people considering taking the vaccine and

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since the reaction is now known, and is now understood and can be effectively treated if it occurs, that the vaccine can again be made available. J&J is a single dose vaccine that is 66%-70% effective in stopping COVID-19 through immunity. Over 350 people in Cowley County received the J&J vaccine prior to the pause, no severe reactions have been reported locally or in Kansas. The Health Department announced in a separate news release that we have resumed providing the vaccine to people that prefer a single dose option.

Moderna & Pfizer vaccines:

To date the multi dose (2 doses) vaccines continue to be the standard for protection against COVID-19. 96% of the vaccinations in Cowley County have been made using the multi dose vaccines. We have had reports of people feeling very ill after the first dose that upon close review were determined to have been recently infected and did not know it at the time of vaccination or that they had recently (30 days or less) had the virus and were vaccinated a bit too quickly after the illness. Why be vaccinated after you have already been ill you may ask? Simply put because we have no idea about how strong of an immune response an individual may have or how severe their illness may have been (slight with no symptoms to extreme). The vaccination is a known constant. When you're vaccinated with your first dose (Prime Dose) you will most often have a sore arm for several days. When you receive your second dose (Boost Dose) you will likely experience illness like symptoms for a day or so that do resolve and leave you feeling well. The effectiveness of the multi dose vaccines have already resulted in the loosening of pandemic restrictions as our community health improves. The vaccines are now readily available, and I sincerely hope you will be vaccinated. It is your health and I respect your decision. I ask that you think about this from a medical viewpoint and talk to your doctor or other trusted health care provider if you have questions or concerns. With no motivation other than wanting this pandemic to end and everyone to be healthy I ask you to please get vaccinated.

Conclusion:

To summarize there are cases of the P.1 variant of COVID-19 in the county. We are having KDHE help us with a testing event this coming Saturday in conjunction with the Health & Safety Fair to see if it is more widespread in our area than we know. Being tested can earn you a \$25 dollar gift card.

COVID-19 vaccines are available. I believe them to be both safe and effective and I urge you to be vaccinated if you haven't yet done so, The Health Department will have a limited amount of vaccine on hand Saturday morning at the H&S Fair if you wish to roll up your sleeve and join the vaccinated people in Cowley County.

As always, we will continue to monitor and track the health of our community and we will report what is happening to you.

I sincerely hope that you all stay well.

Thomas Langer, Public Health Officer
City-Cowley County Health Department.

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