

Eight more deaths linked to COVID

August 27, 2021



The death toll in Del Norte County from the COVID-19 virus has risen to 18; with eight of those deaths occurring since August 13. As of press time, 25 are hospitalized due to the virus.

Additionally, the county reported 139 new cases over the weekend, bringing the active case total to 417 — yet another pandemic high for Del Norte. There were also 17 new incarcerated cases, which moves the active case count among inmates at Pelican Bay State Prison to 49. Currently, Pelican Bay has the most active cases of COVID-19 among California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation facilities.

The newly appointed Public Health Officer for Del Norte County Dr. Aaron Stutz outlined the dire situation in the county and at Sutter Coast Hospital, where he works as an emergency physician.

“We have 22 admitted COVID patients out of 38 admitted patients at the hospital as a whole. We have nine COVID patients in the ICU, seven of whom are intubated on ventilators. We have six more COVID patients in the emergency department that are waiting to be admitted,” said Stutz during a Tuesday county board of supervisors meeting.

According to Stutz, the hospital had three available beds in the emergency department on Friday, but that number shrank to just one by Monday.

“It was a frustrating situation; you just can’t run an emergency department like that. People can’t get seen for their normal issues that are outside of COVID, or even if they have COVID, they can’t get seen in the emergency department,” said Stutz.

Stutz said the majority of COVID patients being admitted to the hospital are younger than 65 years old, and recently they saw their first pediatric hospitalization since the beginning of the pandemic.

“That patient was flown out to a pediatric facility in the Bay Area and is in critical condition,” said Stutz. “For those people in the community who tend to play down the danger of COVID for younger people, I would say it is a very real threat.”

During the meeting, Supervisor Valerie Starkey asked Stutz if the county public health department had maintained contact tracing efforts, as she heard some COVID-positive residents were not contacted by public health.

Despite receiving five additional contact tracing workers from the state, Stutz admitted the county has fallen behind on tracing due to the overwhelming surge.

“At a time like this it does become extremely difficult to perform adequate contact tracing...Once we progress beyond a certain number of cases per day, it becomes almost impossible to track down all the contacts of all the positive cases,” he said.

Starkey also asked Stutz about monoclonal antibody treatment — a potential treatment for mild and moderate cases of COVID-19.

According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, monoclonal antibodies are laboratory-made proteins that mimic the immune system’s ability to fight off harmful antigens such as viruses. Sotrovimab is a monoclonal antibody that is specifically directed against the spike protein of COVID-19, and is designed to block the virus’ attachment and entry into human cells. The FDA approved emergency use of monoclonal therapy for COVID-19 in May.

Stutz said the Sutter Coast Community Clinic has begun offering monoclonal treatment from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. through a partnership with the state. Nevertheless, he said monoclonal treatment of COVID-19 is questionable.

“It’s controversial in the health world as to its efficacy,” said Stutz. “I don’t want to promote the therapy in place of just getting the vaccine; the vaccine is much more preventative and much more effective. [Monoclonal therapy] is something for if you’ve already had COVID, or had a significant exposure such that you’re likely to get COVID and that you have significant medical problems to boot.”

Individuals can also receive COVID-19 testing and vaccines at the community clinic during the same hours.

Supervisor Gerry Hemmingsen asked Stutz about other controversial treatments such as ivermectin, a medicine commonly used to treat parasites in livestock.

Stutz said there is some evidence of ivermectin being effective in fighting COVID, however, there is still not enough data to fully support those claims.

“Most physicians would be willing to give patients medication like this if there was concrete data showing that it would help their medical situation. We’re not generally swayed very much by the commercialism and the politics, we just want to see concrete data in place before we start giving mysterious medication to people,” said Stutz.

According to local public health officials, the most effective method to prevent contraction of COVID-19 is to get the vaccine, yet the vaccination rate in Del Norte County is among the lowest in the state, with 42% of people fully vaccinated. In neighboring Humboldt County, 51.7% of the population is fully vaccinated.

Recently, the Centers for Disease Control recommended vaccine booster shots for immunocompromised individuals who received the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines. The CDC also said eligibility for booster shots would open up to all individuals who received the Pfizer or Moderna shot this fall, with individuals becoming eligible eight months after they received their second dose.