

Don't mess with my cubs: Herd immunity is not for my students

By Ora Hirsch Pescovitz

Oct. 16, 2020

From an early age, I have felt an obligation to care for others. As the oldest of four siblings, the oldest of eight cousins on one side of my family and the only female among twelve cousins on the other, it was expected that I would become a pediatrician when I decided to attend medical school. That's what many "girl physicians" did in the 1970s.

Indeed, I began my medical career as a pediatrician and I still take great pride in that role. But, since then, my career has taken several turns that led to fascinating and rewarding opportunities, including years as a physician-scientist, a medical school and health system administrator, a pharmaceutical company executive, and my current position as president of Oakland University, which includes the OU William Beaumont School of Medicine in metropolitan Detroit and goes by the nickname, "Golden Grizzlies."

Throughout my career, I was always eager to accept leadership opportunities that would arise, but also grounded in my role as wife, mother, and pediatrician.

These days around the Oakland campus, I'm referred to as "Mama Bear."

In early 2020, our country and the world faced an unprecedented confluence of conflicts. It was clear that the COVID-19 virus would result in a global pandemic; that we were about to face an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions; the George Floyd murder ignited the heated public debate about the systemic racism and social injustices plaguing our society; climate change was impacting our country in previously unforeseen ways including the raging fires on the west coast and the hurricanes on the east coast; and, education systems from K-12 through higher education were thrown into utter turmoil.

In my role as a university president, I am not only responsible for the education and financial stability of my university, but also for the health and safety of 22,000 students, faculty, and staff, including for their mental health and morale. As I face these enormous responsibilities,

Since the start of the fall academic year, universities across the country have recorded alarming trends and rapidly increasing numbers of COVID-19 cases. For example, it is believed that in the State of Georgia, 20% of all college students have already been infected since September.

There have been thousands of COVID-19 cases and surges in transmission leading to many students being placed in isolation or quarantine. At numerous universities, floors of residence halls, or entire dormitories or Greek houses have been placed under quarantine.

In addition, in some college towns, where many students live off-campus or where they congregate in bars or other venues, tensions have flared between university leadership and local community leaders and government.

Colleges and universities have taken various approaches to the academic year. Some have chosen to keep all of the classes entirely remote; some are entirely face-to-face; and some are a hybrid of remote classes and face-to-face classes, which is the method employed at Oakland University, where 30% of our classes are in person.

How to provide a safe, healthy and nurturing learning environment is at the heart of “Grizzlies Protect Grizzlies: Healthy Together,” a plan that includes limiting person-to-person contact, enforcement of mask wearing and social distancing, testing and quarantine, a transparent dashboard, redesign of the educational experience and a focus on giving students a positive and enriching college experience.

The plan’s success hinges on fostering a responsive university culture that promotes shared trust among campus community members. Anyone coming to campus is required to complete a daily electronic honor pledge and a health assessment and to adhere to social distancing and mask-wearing standards. The rules are modeled and enforced by student health ambassadors, who stroll the campus to support the effort using positive reinforcement.

Since July, when the plan went into effect, there have been 79 COVID-19 positive cases both on- and off-campus. This translates into a positivity rate of only 0.86 percent, which is below our surrounding county rates and is a relatively low rate compared to many other universities.

But this week, the White House has supported the Great Barrington Declaration, a proposal to allow COVID-19 to spread quickly among young, healthy individuals in order to reach herd immunity, with the false assumption that this will protect the vulnerable members of society. It would not.

The hypothesis is bolstered by data that most college students who have been infected with COVID-19 have had mild or moderate cases. In fact, whether an urban myth or not, there are stories of students at universities like at Brigham Young University, who are intentionally getting infected with COVID-19 so that they can get paid to contribute antibody-rich plasma. At other universities, there are rumors of students having “COVID-19 parties” so that they can “just get it over with already!”

I am horrified by these tales and by fellow university presidents like President John Jenkins of Notre Dame, who attended the Rose Garden nomination of Judge Amy Coney Barrett, and ignored his own university guidelines for social distancing and did not wear a mask at the event.

As a pediatrician, I know that not all young people are invincible, even if they think they are. Furthermore, many young people have pre-existing conditions that predispose them to being vulnerable to severe complications from a COVID-19 infection or even death.

Furthermore, a recent CDC report from 767 hotspot counties demonstrated that increased COVID-19 positivity in individuals under age 25 years led to a significant increase in positivity in the population of those over age 25 within just a few weeks (1) thus exposing highly vulnerable populations and damaging the myth that allowing herd immunity to occur naturally could protect the vulnerable.

The international outcry by medical experts against this White House call for herd immunity has been swift and fierce. (2) I am proud that the medical community has shown a sense of duty to oppose the faulty proposal.

For me, protecting the Oakland University community against the spread of COVID-19 is as fundamental as a maternal instinct to protect my family.

As a mother Grizzly Bear, I will do everything in my power to keep my cubs safe and healthy.

Ora Hirsch Pescovitz, M.D. is president of Oakland University. She is a pediatric endocrinologist and physician-scientist. She was Executive Associate Dean of Research, Indiana University School of Medicine. CEO of the Riley Hospital for Children in Indianapolis, and CEO of University of Michigan Health System, Ann Arbor, Michigan. And, she served as Sr. Vice President at Eli Lilly and Co.

REFERENCES

1. Oster AM, Caruso E, DeVies J, Hartnett KP, Boehmer TK. Transmission dynamics by age group in COVID-19 hotspot counties- Unite States, April-September 2020. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report CDC 24/7: October 9, 2020
2. Allan NA, Burgess RA, Ashworth S, Beale R, Bhadelia N, Bogaert D, Dowd J, Eckerle I, Goldman D, Hamdy A, et al. Scientific consensus on the COVID-19 pandemic: we need to act now. <https://doi.org/10.1016>