

Doctors talk about the COVID-19 'beast': 'I don't even know how to tell you how our hearts break'

STEPHANIE INNES MARCH 27, 2020



For those on the COVID-19 front lines, more cases mean watching more patients linger in critical care for weeks and worrying about having enough intensive-care beds and staff.

Sometimes they are watching members of the same family get sick and die.

Arizona health-care workers, in an unprecedented public health crisis, are fighting a relentless disease that is filling up hospital beds and putting intense pressure on the health care system. Providers sensed a shift as cases began to rise almost a month ago, and they're worried about what comes next.

Patients can get sick suddenly and die when no one thought they would, said Phoenix nephrologist Dr. Jean Robey, who has treated COVID-19 patients with kidney problems.

Others don't get worse, but they don't get better, either, she said.

"They just linger. We try to give them everything we've got and they hang on for weeks," she said. "And now there are few more of them hanging on. And it's just sucking the resources."

Health providers in Arizona who are treating patients with COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus, say it's not unusual for several members of the same family to be infected, and sometimes multiple members are hospitalized.

"All you need is the right kind of chemistry and density and activity, and you will get the domino of multi-family members getting sick, where three people were sick and two were hospitalized and one didn't make it," Robey said.

"That is its own level of horror. I don't even know how to tell you how our hearts break."

'Overall, people are getting sicker'

At least one-third of the patients that Phoenix emergency department physician Dr. Frank LoVecchio saw over the week of June 15 tested positive for COVID-19, a spike from what he'd been seeing in May.

He's noticed an increase in COVID-19 cases over the past three weeks. About half of the total patients he saw were in the emergency department because they either were positive or thought they might be positive, he said.

"For us on the front lines seeing patients, the sheer number of patients, and the sickness of the patients has gone in the wrong way," said LoVecchio, who works at Valleywise Medical Center and other Valley hospitals. "Overall, people are getting sicker."

LoVecchio said there have been "a few times" when more than one member of the same family has died of COVID-19. In one recent case, he recalled a patient who died of COVID-19, and then days later the patient's adult child in their 30s also died.

"People compare it to other diseases. I've been through every flu season for the past 25 years. I study the flu, and people always compare this to the flu, elements of the flu. I don't remember any time when two people in a household died of the flu," he said.

He also can't recall a time that when going into a shift, he could know walking in that about half the patients he'd be seeing were there because of one illness — that they either were COVID-19 positive, or had symptoms that seemed like they could be COVID-19.

"It's never, ever been like that," he said.

When he went to a grocery store in Phoenix Thursday afternoon and counted two people of eight wearing face masks, LoVecchio was discouraged. That's the kind of behavior fueling what's happening in hospitals right now, he said.

"I would hope the social norm would reverse," he said. "We need to make it more normal to wear a mask in public, at least until we get through this."

Rising numbers of younger patients

Phoenix infectious disease physician Dr. Venu Gill said Friday night that she has never been as busy in her entire career as she was during the past week.

"We are seeing all sorts of people. We are seeing young patients in their 20s and 30s ... We are seeing more younger patients now for sure," said Gill, who works at Banner Thunderbird Medical Center and Abrazo Arrowhead Hospital.

The younger patients tend to have better outcomes than the older ones, but

some of them are being hospitalized for three to five days before getting discharged, she said.

"I have seen entire families affected, where the husband is in one room, the wife in the other room and the daughter in the third. Sometimes it is emotionally draining as well, to see all that."

State Rep. Amish Shah, a Democrat from Phoenix and an emergency physician for Dignity Health, said 57% of the people testing positive are under 45 years old. He's worried about that group of people spreading the virus to those who are more vulnerable, including senior citizens and people with underlying health conditions.

Gill said the first noticeable increase in COVID-19 patients at her hospitals was after the May 23-25 Memorial Day weekend, one week after after Gov. Doug Ducey's executive stay-at-home order expired.

At the beginning of the pandemic, Banner Thunderbird had two floors reserved for COVID-19 patients. That has since grown to four floors, she said.

Dr. John Anwar, a Phoenix hospitalist who admits COVID-19 patients into inpatient beds, said "without a doubt" he's been admitting more patients in the past week than before, including more young people.

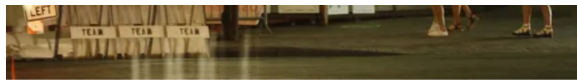
"The governor's stay-at-home order did result in a drop in cases. You can tell the difference now, after reopening," he said. "We are seeing it every day in the ER ... We are seeing more sickness."

It's less common for younger people to get extremely ill and end up on a ventilator unless they are high risk with underlying health conditions like cancer, HIV, diabetes, obesity or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, he said.



People with masks on make their way around Mill Avenue in Tempe on June 20, 2020.





People without masks on make their way around Mill Avenue in Tempe on June 20, 2020.



People without masks on make their way around Mill Avenue in Tempe on June 20, 2020.



People gather to eat and drink on a Saturday night on Mill Avenue in Tempe on June 20, 2020.



Gov. Doug Ducey along with Dr. Cara Christ, director of Arizona Department of Health Services, and Maj. Gen. Michael McGuire walk to a room to update the state on COVID-19 during a news conference in Phoenix on June 17, 2020.



Gov. Doug Ducey updates the state on COVID-19 during a news conference in Phoenix on June 17, 2020.



Maj. Gen. Michael McGuire puts his mask on after speaking to reporters on COVID-19 during a news conference in Phoenix on June 17, 2020.



Dr. Cara Christ, director of the Arizona Department of Health Services, puts her mask on after speaking to reporters on COVID-19 during a news conference in Phoenix on June 17, 2020.



Gov. Doug Ducey puts his mask on after speaking to reporters on COVID-19 during a news conference in Phoenix on June 17, 2020.



Gov. Doug Ducey updates the state on COVID-19 during a news conference in Phoenix on June 17, 2020.



A person is brought to a medical transport vehicle from Banner Desert Medical Center as several transports and ambulances are shown parked outside the emergency room entrance, Tuesday, June 16, 2020, in Mesa.



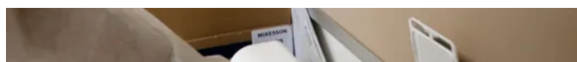
Berto Cortez, a CVS pharmacy technician, shows how COVID-19 tests are processed in a testing area set up by CVS at St. Vincent de Paul medical clinic on June 15, 2020, in Phoenix.



Signage in Spanish at the entrance to a local post office suggests social distancing and wearing PPE, Tuesday, June 16, 2020, in Phoenix.



A customer stops at a drive-thru self-swab coronavirus test site at a CVS Pharmacy location on June 14, 2020, in Phoenix.





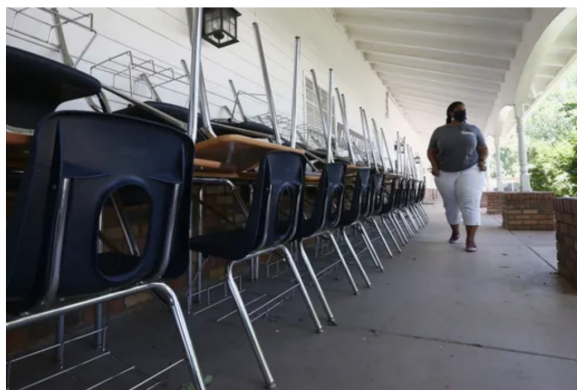
Berto Cortez, a CVS pharmacy technician, shows how COVID-19 tests are processed in a testing area set up by CVS at St. Vincent de Paul medical clinic on June 15, 2020, in Phoenix.



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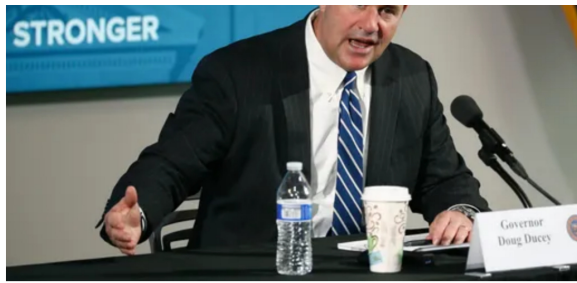


In this May 13, 2020 file photo guests dine in-house at a restaurant in Phoenix.



In this June 1, 2020 file photo, Kristina Washington, special education staff member at Desert Heights Preparatory Academy, walks past a series of desks and chairs at the school in Phoenix, returning to her classroom for only the second time since the coronavirus outbreak closed schools.

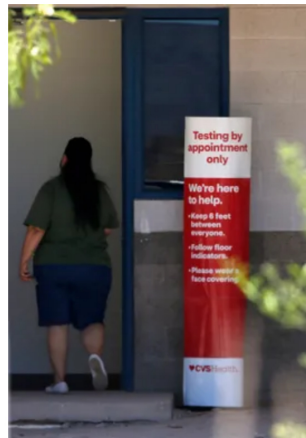




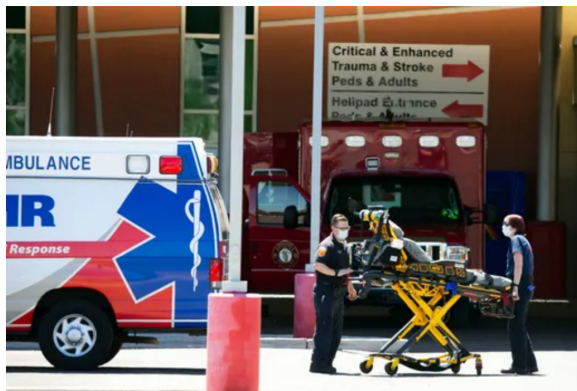
Arizona Republican Gov. Doug Ducey answers a question after announcing the latest coronavirus numbers and recent spike in cases during a news conference Thursday, June 11, 2020, in Phoenix.



Dr. Cara Christ, Director of Arizona Department of Health Services, answers a question after Arizona Republican Gov. Doug Ducey announced the latest coronavirus numbers and recent spike in cases during a news conference Thursday, June 11, 2020, in Phoenix.



A patron with an appointment lines up at the St. Vincent de Paul Clinic to get a coronavirus test as the clinic has partnered with CVS Health to provide the testing Tuesday, June 9, 2020, in Phoenix.



The scene outside the emergency room at Banner Desert Medical Center in Mesa on June 9, 2020. Banner Health, Arizona's largest health system, has about half of the state's hospitalized COVID-19 on any given day.





Matthew Garcia, owner of Arizona Bio-Fogging Disinfection Services, uses a propane powered bio-fogger to disinfect the Jabz Boxing studio at 3136 E. Indian School Road in Phoenix, as the boxing fitness center for women prepares to reopen following their closure in mid March because of the COVID-19 pandemic, on May 14, 2020.



Father Andres Arango distributes Holy Communion while wearing a mask amid COVID-19 at Gordon Hall at St. Gregory's Catholic Church in Phoenix on May 10, 2020.



Bartenders Chase Watts, right, and Luke Valenzuela make drinks at Culinary Dropout in Phoenix on May 22, 2020.



Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey Dr. Cara Christ, Director of Arizona Department of Health Services, left, depart after speaking about the state's most recent coronavirus data during a news conference Thursday, May 28, 2020, in Phoenix.





Customers drink at the bar as masked employees work at Culinary Dropout in Phoenix on May 22, 2020.



A phone case and repair kiosk employee relaxes in between customers at Chandler Fashion Center mall in Chandler on May 23, 2020.



Greg Neises, a bartender, wipes down the bar after serving a guest at the Hotel Valley Ho in Scottsdale on May 22, 2020. With demand starting to pick back up at the Hotel Valley Ho, the hotel has implemented procedures such as partitions, limiting capacity and having staff wear masks during the COVID-19 pandemic.

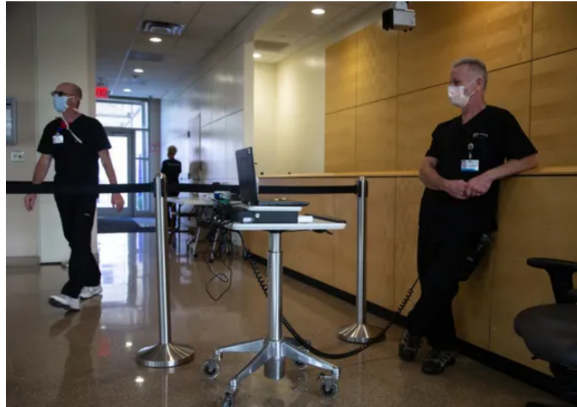


Rianna Vallecillo receives her diploma from principal Sarah Tolar during a senior sendoff celebration on May 21, 2020, at Marcos de Niza High School in Tempe, Ariz.





Actor Sean Penn records a video on a community member's phone at a food distribution point before the start of a weekend-long curfew in Coyote Canyon, New Mexico, on the Navajo Nation on May 15, 2020.



Al Duberchin (right, medical tech) monitor employees temperatures, including Mark Walsh (left), May 19, 2020, as they enter the Banner University Medical Center Phoenix, 1111 E. McDowell Road, Phoenix, Arizona.



Volunteer Tuqa Alfatawi, help Muslim community mostly from Syria, during the Food distribution at the Islamic Community Center of Phoenix. Families in need came for a drive-through service due to coronavirus for safety.



Parishioners attend Mass at St. Luke Catholic Church in Phoenix May 17, 2020. The church resumed services limited to 25% capacity after state restrictions due to the coronavirus were allowed to expire.





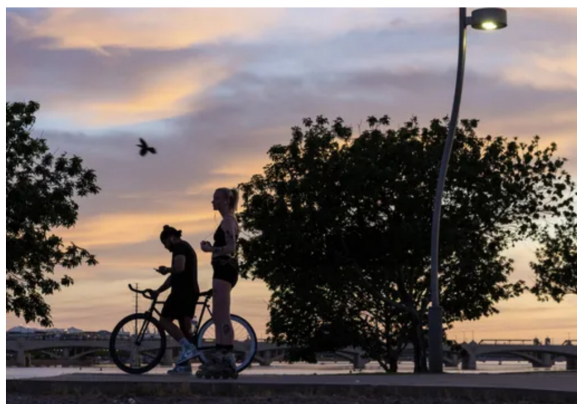
Mountain View students laugh and react to cars passing by during the Mountain View High School senior parade salute in Mesa, Ariz. on May 16, 2020.



Graduating seniors toss their caps at 7:15pm during the Mountain View High School senior parade salute in Mesa, Ariz. on May 16, 2020.

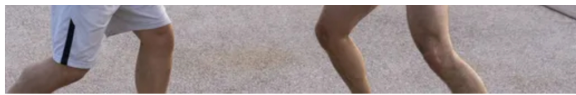


Tubers float down the Salt River during the COVID-19 pandemic in Mesa, Ariz. on May 16, 2020. Arizona Governor Doug Ducey lifted his stay-at-home order Friday, the 15, and the day after Salt River Tubing reopened with some guidelines in place to promote safety during the pandemic.



Local residents go for evening outing at Tempe Town Lake on May 14, 2020.





James Landry (left) and Coy Vernon train while others chill having picnic at Scottsdale Civic Center on May 14, 2020.



Erin Walter, from left, Angelica Kenrick and Sheri Rearick, all with the Professional Beauty Association, participate in an online work meeting at Kenrick's home in Phoenix on May 14, 2020. Walter and Rearick surprised Kenrick on her birthday by coming to her home, to work from home. The three employees had not seen each other in weeks.



May 12, 2020; Scottsdale, Arizona, USA; No spectators allowed signs at the club house during round one at the Scottsdale AZ Open at Talking Stick Golf Club's O'Odham course. This is the first semi-significant sports event to take place in the Valley since the sports shutdown in March due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Mandatory Credit: Rob Schumacher-USA TODAY Sports



People pack into CASA Tempe on the first day of dine in reopening in Tempe on May 11, 2020.





People pack into CASA Tempe on the first day of dine-in reopening in Tempe on May 11, 2020.

'If you are ever going to trust your doctors, trust us now'

Dr. Ross Goldberg, a general surgeon at Valleywise Medical Center and president of the Arizona Medical Association, said, "I understand why a good chunk of the public doesn't understand this, because they aren't seeing it and I hope to God they never do. Yes, some people are asymptomatic, some people have mild symptoms, but those who get sick can get really sick."

If Goldberg has any public message from inside the hospital walls, it's this: COVID-19 is real.

"If you are ever going to trust your doctors, trust us now ... This is a complex issue, but when it comes to health, give us the benefit of the doubt," he said.

"There's only a finite number of health care workers. If we go down for being sick, there's not like a backup you just plug right in. There's only so many of us. We want to make sure we're available and here to do our job to take care of everyone."

Goldberg is not expecting the number of ill patients to go down right away.

"Anything we do now to prevent, we're not going to see for a couple of weeks," he said. "Everything is delayed. If there's a big gathering and if one person is sick and the others get exposed, it will take up to 14 days for the others to show symptoms ... What we are seeing now is from a couple of weeks ago."

LoVecchio said he, too, is unsure about the way the disease will play out. With more testing, Arizona's percent of positive tests of all tests given should be going down. But that's not happening, he said.

Arizona has been seeing record-setting numbers of patients testing positive for COVID-19. Friday's report of 3,246 new cases was the largest-ever number of cases reported in a day, followed by 3,109 on Saturday. Known deaths from COVID-19 in Arizona were at 1,338 as of Saturday.

"We worry about the strain to come. The story that is not being told is the non-COVID story, about diseases that are not COVID, that cannot be treated correctly because we haven't opened the resources by mitigating COVID," Robey said.

"That's where our hearts are breaking. People who need stuff but we are now short on staff, short on beds, short on supplies. We care about the COVID patients, don't get me wrong ... But the non-COVID patients are suffering, too."

A screenshot of a mobile number input form. At the top, it says 'MOBILE NUMBER' in blue. Below that is a text input field with a dropdown menu showing the US flag, followed by parentheses and dashes for the area code and number. At the bottom is a red 'Continue' button with a right-pointing arrow.

COVID-19 and mental health

LoVecchio has noticed an uptick in patients with mental-health issues, including substance use disorder, coming into emergency departments.

"People are depressed for a million and one reasons," he said. "We are seeing more and more people coming in who are homeless ... If you are homeless, we can't just discharge you to the street. We have to find you a place to stay, and that is impacting us, too. It's becoming more and more difficult to find a place that will accommodate them."

If patients need to be discharged to another facility such as rehabilitation, the need for a COVID-19 test can cause delays, and it's hard on the patients, he said. The testing is getting faster, but there are still wait times for beds in other facilities, and that can lead to additional demands on emergency departments, he said.

It's not uncommon for patients to be waiting one or two days. If someone has serious mental health issues, it's not helpful for them to be waiting in an emergency department, he said.

"Most rehabs want to get a COVID test that's negative before they accept them. Thank God there's a few of them that have opened up areas where they'll treat patients with COVID who have no symptoms," he said.

"Our health care system with regard to mental health is already stressed in our state. Now, you have them dictating that they don't want the patients who are (COVID-19) positive. We see the same situation with nursing homes, they don't want them unless they are negative. Easy for them to say, hard for us to do."

Patients from all over state treated in Phoenix, Tucson

Areas of Arizona with the highest rates of infection are in more rural counties — Apache, Navajo, Santa Cruz, Yuma and La Paz.

But the statewide surge system means many of the sickest COVID-19 patients, no matter where in Arizona they are from, are often ending up in hospitals in Phoenix and Tucson, where there's more specialty equipment and staff available.

Hospitalizations of inpatients with suspected and confirmed COVID-19 hit record highs the week of June 15, as did the number of patients with suspected and confirmed COVID-19 using ventilators.

As of Friday, there were just 268 available ICU beds statewide, representing 85% occupancy.

ICU beds are what the front line workers say they worry about most. Having extra beds isn't enough. Additional ICU nurses are needed to staff them.

Arizona hospitals have not had to use surge mode, which means using beds that go beyond their normal capacity, but it's not a scenario medical professionals want to reach. It can mean moving staff into jobs they're not familiar with, and hiring contract workers who don't know the hospital.

"If it's not an important thing to do, do not go out. If you go out and you have to go out, please wear your mask. There's no doubt the mask will save you and save others from getting sick," said Anwar, the Phoenix hospitalist.

"If we do not do that, there will be no beds to take care of your loved one. We will not have enough ICU beds to ventilate you if you need. So help yourself by staying safe. Practicing social distancing is very, very, important."

Doctor: COVID-19 is 'a beast'

LoVecchio, the Phoenix emergency department physician, lost two former colleagues to COVID-19. Both were health-care workers in New York City.

"They were older, they were in their 60s but they were still working," he said. "They were productive, still seeing patients every day."

He doesn't use death as the only marker of the seriousness of the illness. That's because COVID-19 can cause long-term problems. Someone may survive a serious bout but may end up with lingering problems, including breathing issues.

The people who die are disproportionately older, he said. But he describes COVID-19 as a "beast." It can do serious damage to younger people, too, he said.

"We see many people who are younger. I think on a given day, if you work an eight- to 10 hour shift in the ED it's not uncommon to see two to three people between 20 and 30," he said.

"We're getting to the point where it's one to two degrees of separation. A couple of months ago it was four or five degrees. Now we see more and more people take it serious, take it for real."

Shah views the supply of ICU beds as most in peril in Arizona right now.

"Now is the time to act," he said. "Seniors and others at risk should try to stay at home as much as possible to avoid contact with each other ... After witnessing how tremendously our case counts went up, when you see that you just know it could get much, much worse."

The fact that cases are going up every day means Arizonans did something in

the past that they should not do again, Robey said. That's why she's so adamant that Arizonans wear face masks and socially distance, to keep the younger people from spreading the illness to those who may not survive it.

"It's all Russian roulette. Three thousand new cases does not mean 3,000 hospitalizations. That sets something in motion," she said. "The cases go up now, the mortality goes up later ... We saw what happened in New York, and we can't be New York. That is misery."

Sick and cut adrift from family

Someone with COVID-19 symptoms who seeks help in the emergency department is most likely going to find themselves alone, without friends or family to be their advocates, and that is hard for both the patients and the doctors, LoVecchio said.

"Nowadays, I'd say almost never are you allowed to have somebody there with you," LoVecchio said. "Think about that. If you drop your loved one off in the emergency department and they are really sick and they might die, that might be the last time you see them and the nurse in triage is probably going to tell you that, you know, 'We can't let you back there.'"

Family members are desperate for information about their loved ones and depend on ICU nurses to call them with updates, LoVecchio said.

"It's terrible. They are begging, begging, begging for information," he said of patients' families and other loved ones. "What would you do otherwise if your family member was in the intensive care unit? You'd go visit them. That is not possible at this point."

LoVecchio has allowed patients in the emergency department to use his personal phone to FaceTime their loved ones. It happens about once per shift, where a patient doesn't have a cellphone, and doesn't know the phone number of their loved ones, so health care workers need to help them do that, too.

'It feels life-and-death scary'

In addition to patients who are showing up in emergency departments and getting admitted to hospitals for COVID-19, there are some very sick patients struggling with the illness at home, said Connie Canada, a school nurse who has been volunteering with free clinics in the Phoenix area, doing telehealth visits with patients who are sick with COVID-19.

"For those individuals who actually get sick and have symptoms (of COVID-19), it feels life-and-death scary," Canada said. "I'm talking with people who feel like they can't breathe. They can't get from the bed to the bathroom on their own. They have no strength. They have constant pain and the isolation is devastating."

She's consulted with families where eight people are living in 1,000 square feet and it's hard to keep a distance when one of them is sick. Not only that,

many of them are considered essential workers, working in food service, including grocery stores, so they are going out in the community every day and potentially bringing the virus home with them.

"That's the story that's not being told. What does it look like in the home?" she said. "It's one thing to say the person is in the hospital and on a ventilator and that's scary and they are dying ... Then there are the ones who are sick but not sick enough to be in the hospital and they are isolated and having to care for themselves. But they are so sick that this is beyond difficult."

The hardest part of the illness lasts a week, but for others it can last longer, she said. The most common symptoms are extreme fatigue to the point where muscles ache, shortness of breath, coughs and headaches that won't let up and fever, she said.

"I'm seeing the more significant cases where literally I am talking to them throughout the day with text message or by the phone," she said.

Some of the patients Canada sees are uninsured and some are undocumented. They are fearful of going to the hospital because of cost, and other times because of immigration status. Most are between the ages of 30 and 50, she said.

Someone who avoids the hospital until the last minute — until a family member in desperation calls 911 — is going to have a higher risk of death, she said.

"I help them to arrange with neighbors or friends or family members that don't live with them to be able to bring them food, drop it off on their porch, helping them with logistics, really," she said.

"If the state of Arizona wanted to really do something to help these individuals, a program like Meals on Wheels or something of that nature would help. There is a large group of humanitarians out there trying to do this on their own or through some non-profits, but we're talking 3,000 positives a day now, we need to up our game a little bit."

Sometimes Canada is seeing patients who are sent home from the emergency department because they aren't sick enough. But those people on occasion will get worse and end up in the hospital days later, she said.

"I guarantee you, if you have bared witness to what this can do to you or your loved one, you would not be angry at someone saying 'Protect yourself and wear a mask,'" she said.

"We have to stop thinking about just us and consider everybody else. The numbers aren't lying. More people need help."

Reach health care reporter Stephanie Innes at Stephanie.Innes@gannett.com or at 602-444-8369. Follow her on Twitter [@stephanieinnes](https://twitter.com/stephanieinnes)

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