



# UMB News

## President's Q&A Provides COVID-19 Update

**December 18, 2020** | By [Lou Cortina](#)

COVID-19 vaccines are here. More vaccines are coming. Though developed and tested in a relatively short time, they are safe and effective. You'll have to wait your turn to get vaccinated. The pandemic is far from over, but there's a light at the end of the tunnel.

These were among the takeaways from the [University of Maryland, Baltimore's \(UMB\) President's Q&A: A COVID-19 Update](#) virtual presentation Dec. 17, which featured UMB President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS**, and three doctors from the [University of Maryland School of Medicine's \(UMSOM\) faculty](#) who are working on vaccine development, pandemic response and recovery, contact tracing efforts, and more.

The virtual Q&A was held two days after the first doses of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA)-approved [Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine](#) were administered to [University of Maryland Medical System](#) health care workers. Researchers at UMSOM's [Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health \(CVD\)](#) were involved in the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine trials as well as trials for the Moderna, Inc., vaccine.

"The past week has been pretty remarkable," said **Wilbur Chen, MD, MS**, an infectious disease expert, chief of the adult clinical studies section at CVD, and a member of Gov. Larry Hogan's Coronavirus Response Team, pointing out the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine's approval and the impending approval of the Moderna vaccine. "As we head into next week, we'll have two COVID vaccines that will be deployable. I see that as a sign of hope as we enter the holiday season."

Chen was joined on the Q&A by UMSOM colleagues **Marianne Cloeren, MD, MPH**, associate professor, Department of Medicine, and occupational and environmental health specialist, and **Mario Majette, MD, MPH**, clinical instructor, Department of Family and Community Medicine, and director of student and employee health. They answered audience questions about topics including vaccine safety, education, and acceptance; pediatric vaccine trials; and contact tracing at UMB.

Responding to a question about the safety of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which was reported to be 95 percent effective in preventing COVID-19 in trial participants, Chen said a few volunteers experienced allergic reactions and there was evidence of Bell's palsy in a couple of participants, but the numbers are low and not at a rate that's higher than in the general population.

"Allergic reactions are a very rare event that can happen after any type of vaccination or after receiving any new drug, so that's not completely unexpected. Thankfully, it's a treatable condition," he said. "We continue to review the safety and efficacy of all vaccines, even after licensure. We watch these reactions very closely, but these vaccines are highly efficacious."

### Vaccine Education and Acceptance



(clockwise from top left) Bruce Jarrell, Mario Majette, Wilbur Chen and Marianne Cloeren

Majette said he would be getting vaccinated after the Q&A, and he touted CVD's efforts to boost vaccine education and acceptance in underserved African American and Latino communities in Baltimore and around Maryland.

"People in these communities have some distrust of the medical community, and it's a real concern," he said. "But the COVID-19 mortality rate in the U.S. is around 1.8 percent. So, if I'm looking at the stats, I'm much better off getting the vaccine and dealing with a few potential

side effects than I am dealing with a 2 percent chance of dying, if I get COVID. I tell my patients it's a matter of risk and benefit — and I think the risk of COVID is much higher than the risk of taking the vaccine."

Audience member **Charmaine Rochester-Eyeguokan, PharmD, CDE, BCACP**, a professor at the [University of Maryland School of Pharmacy](#), said she has heard concerns from patients with chronic conditions that the federal government's Operation Warp Speed had developed the vaccines too quickly for them to be fully safe. But Chen reiterated his confidence in the vaccines' safety, adding that it is critical for health care officials and community leaders to provide honest and transparent information about the vaccines and any safety issues that arise.

"The name Operation Warp Speed almost implies that we're trying to go so fast that we're skipping over procedures for evaluating the safety and efficacy of these vaccines, but that's not true," he said. "Hopefully, health care clinicians will feel equipped to go to patients who have those concerns, talk to them, and say, 'You're at high risk of getting COVID-19. These vaccines have been shown to be safe and efficacious. Let's talk about this, because I want you to get vaccinated, and this will benefit you.'"

Chen detailed the vaccine rollout population order, with health care workers first in line followed by residents of long-term care facilities, essential workers who are unable to telework including first responders, and people with comorbid medical conditions or over age 65. He anticipated that by the fall or winter of 2021, vaccination would be available for most of the general population to the point that we “could open up society again and go back to face-to-face learning” for K-12 students and beyond.

### Contact Tracing Cooperation

Cloeren, who oversees UMB's [COVID-19 Hotline](#) and [SAFE on Campus](#) symptom monitoring system, reiterated the importance of UMB community members cooperating with the University's contact tracing efforts. She said people who report a positive test will be asked a different set of questions depending on their work situation or how they may have contracted the virus.

“If somebody in your household has the virus, it's pretty straightforward how you got it,” she said. “But if it's a mystery as to how you got it, we may ask more intensive questions about whether you were part of a group event where you were in contact with other members of the UMB community, where you may have gotten it, and where others may also have gotten it. We want to make sure we identify any kind of group exposure history so we may notify people in that group of the risk.”

Jarrell noted that vaccine distribution would be set up at the SMC Campus Center in the coming months in another collaboration with the [University of Maryland Medical Center](#) (UMMC), and he talked with pride about UMB's 2020 achievements in the face of adversity.

“I'm very pleased about how UMB and UMMC have coordinated care, resources, and services around our two institutions,” he said. “Looking back over this past year and all that we've done at UMB, it's really unbelievable. Every school has had a significant impact on our COVID response. Every school has been able to maintain its educational and research programs and in some cases deliver clinical care.

“We've got a tremendous amount to be proud of at UMB. I'm certainly proud of it. And I know a lot of people around the state are not only proud of us, but they've also tapped into our experts and resources on a regular basis.”

Watch the entire program by accessing the link at the top of the page.

## SHARE THIS ARTICLE

---

The University of Maryland, Baltimore is the founding campus of the University System of Maryland.  
620 W. Lexington St., Baltimore, MD 21201 | 410-706-3100  
© 2019-2020 University of Maryland, Baltimore. All rights reserved.