



UMB News

Face to Face: A Safe Return to UMB

September 10, 2021 | By [Alex Likowski](#)

Following a summer hiatus, the regular program hosted by University of Maryland, Baltimore (UMB) President **Bruce E. Jarrell, MD, FACS** — *Virtual Face to Face with President Bruce Jarrell* — returned Sept. 9 with a focus on safety and emotional health as members of the UMB community settle back in to working and learning in a mostly in-person environment.

For many on campus, the return isn't exactly what was expected. Just four months ago, 3 million Americans were being vaccinated every day, prompting President Joe Biden to predict a "summer of joy" and prompting universities like UMB to gear up for full scale returns in the fall.

To ensure the return was a safe one, Jarrell instituted a vaccine requirement for all students and University employees. As a result, the vaccination rate at UMB is currently over 95 percent.

But as we adapt to COVID-19, COVID-19 — as viruses tend to do — is adapting to us. The most prevalent COVID-19 variant, the highly contagious Delta, accounted for just 3 percent of Maryland COVID-19 cases in May, but that number jumped to 93 percent in August, according to University of Maryland Medical System President and CEO **Mohan Suntha, MD, MBA**, who is also the Marlene and Stewart Greenebaum Professor in Radiation Oncology.

The World Health Organization has also added a new variant to its Variants of Interest watchlist — Mu — citing what it says is Mu's apparent resistance to the antibodies produced by natural immunity, current vaccines, and monoclonal antibody treatments. The Mu variant has been reported in every state but Nebraska, but so far only in small numbers.

As the Delta variant has grown to become the predominant strain, the number of cases has risen to very high levels, with new hospitalizations and deaths resulting from COVID-19 infection occurring almost exclusively among the unvaccinated. The American Academy of Pediatrics says the number of children testing positive for COVID-19 jumped "exponentially" between Aug. 5 and Sept. 2, with more than a quarter-million added just last week. At this writing, children under age 12 are not approved to receive a vaccine in the U.S.

Unlike the vaccine approval process for adults, which required two months of trial data for review, the Food and Drug Administration is requiring six months of data for pediatric vaccines, said panelist **James D. Campbell, MD, MS**, professor of pediatrics and principal investigator of two pediatric vaccine trials at the University of Maryland School of Medicine's Center for Vaccine Development and Global Health.

"A quarter of all the cases now are children. Some pediatric hospitals in places where Delta is surging more than here are full, their ICUs are full," he said. "We need additional tools. We know these vaccines work really well, we just need to have the data reviewed so we can determine whether or not they can be used safely in kids."

Apart from medical concerns, UMB students and employees face an array of mental health challenges: the often complicated balancing of work and home life, stress induced by changing policies and requirements, and fear of working in close proximity with colleagues after working apart for so long.

"For both the students and for staff and faculty, it's been a really hard year. We're already deciding to define this as another generation trauma," explained **Cassandra Moon, PsyD**, staff psychologist and outreach director of the UMB Student Counseling Center. "You feel like you need to work a little bit harder, that your motivation is a little bit lower. You feel like your sleep's impacted a bit. Your mood's lower. Everything's a bit more foggy, as I describe it. And because of that, if you try to set yourself up with the expectations of where you were in 2019, you're setting yourself up to fail."

A challenge for many parents right now is how to balance the demands of work and home. "I have staff who have kids who have been sent home from school because they were exposed [to COVID]," said **Susan McKechnie, MBA**, associate vice president for financial services and university controller. Those parents are forced to take leave, often on short notice, creating a difficult situation for

supervisors now that telework has been reduced to a minimum — what’s been described as “most of the people, most of the time” on campus. “Could we get to, maybe, most of the people, some of the time?” McKechnie asked. “Maybe roll back to the [June 1] environment, where we’re not 100 percent telework.”

“I’m totally sympathetic to that. Obviously, we want flexibility to be the rule here,” Jarrell replied. “If that’s happening with schools, then we’re going to have to step back and look at things again and try to make what’s a reasonable decision that’s respectful of what parents need to be doing at home.”

To watch the entire discussion, including questions from the audience, use the video link at the top of this page.

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