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EDITORIAL

Boosters have a benefit

COVID-19 vaccines won't keep you from getting the virus. In fact, if you got them more than six months ago, they may not provide a statistically significant amount of protection against the current omicron variant at all, unless you have a booster shot, studies show.

But that doesn't mean you shouldn't get the vaccine, or if you're eligible, the booster shot.

Because those studies also show that those vaccines — when boosted — are highly effective at keeping you out of the hospital and from getting seriously sick.

The Associated Press recently reported that the national drive to get booster shots to those who have been vaccinated has begun to falter.

Just 40% of fully vaccinated Americans have received a booster dose, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Locally, our numbers are slightly better, but not dramatically.

As of Wednesday, Montour County led the way, with 54.5% of its vaccinated residents having received a booster shot. In Columbia County, 18,814 had received a booster shot of 37,128 vaccinated, a 50.6% rate. Northumberland and Luzerne trailed behind, with 48.6% and 46.7% boosted respectively.

We're betting that at least part of that reason for the booster bust is that our public health advocates have to sell the public on a complicated set of facts.

It would be easier if COVID vaccines were more like the jabs for polio, mumps or measles — shots that for the most part have eliminated the diseases they vaccinate against. But they're not.

Instead, it appears their main benefit is that they keep those who get the virus from becoming seriously sick. It also appears that to maintain optimal levels of protection, a booster shot is needed about five months after the first set of vaccinations has been received.

Studies that came out last week underscored the effectiveness of the booster shots.

A third dose prevented hospitalization for 90% of those who had received the shot and gotten COVID-19, during both the delta and omicron periods, one study released by the CDC found. The protection was much lower for those who had received two doses more than six months earlier.

A second study released by the CDC found that those with boosted vaccines had the highest level of protection during both the delta and omicron waves.

Meanwhile, a third study that compared rates of symptomatic infections among those who had received three shots, those who had received two more than six months prior and those who are unvaccinated found those with three shots were significantly less likely to come down with a symptomatic infection.

So, if you're among the roughly 30% to 40% of people in our region still completely unvaccinated, please consider getting the shot. And if you're in the roughly 50% of the vaccinated who haven't gotten a booster shot, get one when you're eligible.

It won't protect everyone from getting the disease, but the data suggests it will at least keep you out of the hospital.

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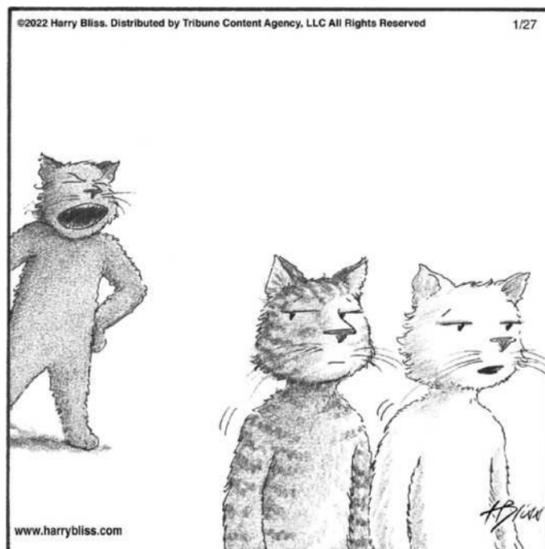
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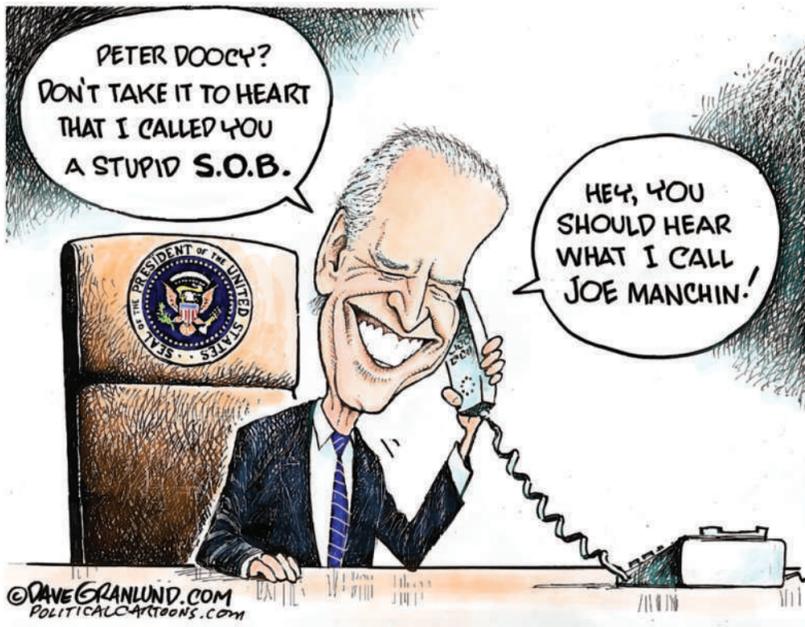
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Frequent contributors are limited to one letter per month.

Bliss



"He always has to get the last 'meow' in."



LETTERS

Research depends on primates

Thank you for providing important context in your Jan. 25 editorial ("Monkey research important for all") about the Jan. 21 accident near Danville involving 100 research monkeys headed for a Centers for Disease and Control Prevention approved quarantine facility.

The accident generated factually incorrect statements about research monkeys. As you state in your editorial, humane and ethical research with monkeys has led to lifesaving medical discoveries including but not limited to a polio vaccine, antiviral treatments for HIV/AIDS, and effective surgical procedures for patients suffering from traumatic brain injuries and neurodegenerative diseases. Monkeys share between 93% and 98% of their DNA and physiological features with humans, making them a valuable model for human disease research.

The biomedical research sector relies on monkeys and this reliance has grown during the COVID-19 pandemic. Research monkeys are essential to the development of COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics. All three vaccines for COVID-19 approved for use in the U.S. were first tested with macaque monkeys — as well as mice and golden Syrian hamsters — before entering human clinical trials. Many scientists are now calling for a domestic strategic reserve to ensure the American biomedical research sector has enough research monkeys to continue developing safe and effective drugs and vaccines for COVID-19 and other diseases.

The U.S. imports approximately a third of its 70,000 research monkeys from abroad — primarily Mauritius and Vietnam — to complement its domestic population. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention oversee the safe importation of research monkeys. Once the animals make it to research facilities, the USDA conducts regular inspections to ensure their continued health and well-being.

These stringent regulations exist to ensure the health and well-being of the mon-

keys and also to make sure monkeys involved in research studies do not have any pathogens that could skew experimental results and lead to the development of unsafe drugs and vaccines.

Some news outlets and animal rights organizations compare the accident near Danville to the best-selling thriller "The Hot Zone," alleging the three monkeys that were captured in the Montour County forest and the monkey that hissed at a woman involved in the accident were carrying dangerous pathogens.

In fact, the 100 monkeys involved in the accident were pathogen-free monkeys. The woman who encountered the hissing monkey went to the hospital and was treated for rabies solely as a precautionary measure. The Pennsylvania state police warned residents not to approach the escaped monkeys before they were caught in the forest because there is no way to predict how wild animals will react to humans, especially in an unfamiliar environment — not because they were infected with diseases.

Animal rights activist groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals and Action for Primates are largely to blame for the misinformation and false sense of alarm triggered by the accident and escape of three monkeys. PETA and other similar groups have only one goal: Stop all animal research and testing in the U.S. They seized this accident as an opportunity to spread propaganda about animal research.

Our polls indicate that when Americans are given adequate contextual information about animal research, they tend to be more supportive. The monkeys involved in the accident are specifically bred pathogen-free animals destined for research studies that will contribute to disease treatments and cures. No amount of sensationalizing will change these facts.

EVA MACIEJEWSKI

Director of Communications
Foundation for Biomedical Research
Washington, D.C.

Cats — my favorite people with tails

After the PSPCA took my cats, four more cats, cold and hungry, were dumped on me. So, what was I supposed to do, not help them? A woman with seven cats called me. No one would help her. Cindy is a veteran who served her country, so how could I say no to her? For now, I am fostering her cats until she finds a place to live. Imagine loving your pets so much, but you don't have a place to take them.

I was dealing with these female trolls who reported me to the PSPCA and then two more trolls reported me. Both times the Animal Control officer couldn't find a thing wrong. Then a few years ago, ARC Queen Mary Sult, came to my house when I wasn't home with a troubled woman who wanted her kittens back. Mary saw a dead cat. She jumped to conclusion, took pictures and called her friend at the PSPCA. I explained to the officer that the cat was dumped days ago. I find dead cats on my land. Someone poisoned them. Then I was reported again by a deranged woman I had helped with cats.

My cat sisters and I work great together rescuing cats. Shouldn't we all be working together for the sake of the animals? If you can't help, say you can't. Don't leave people hanging - call them back. We all need to do something about the cat problem that's out of control in every town, and not just talk about it.

Again, I bring attention to John. I want to protect him from animal neglect charges in the future. One day the PSPCA will come after him and he'll be called a hoarder. John lives on a back road where cats get dumped. He has over 40 breeding cats, and by summer he'll have more breeding cats. My cats were spayed and

neutered, but the PSPCA chose to take my cats — not John's cats. Where are you, PSPCA?

I've been helping John with cat food since September. Last week, five awesome ladies brought me a bunch of cat food and a donation. Lots of people reached out to me. What a wonderful act of kindness by so many people. THANK YOU, EVERYBODY!

When I was a kid, my dad hit me for feeding our neighbor's starving dog. Months later that neighbor shot his dog and his cat, too. The neighborhood couldn't believe he shot his pets. All we could do was cry!

I knew one day I was going to help animals. I listened to Bob Barker say, "Spay and neuter your pets." My heated cat shelter helped a lot of cats from freezing outside. I never thought I would be caring for so many cats when I moved here. It was forced on me, and I ended up loving it. Cats are my favorite people with tails.

Attention Miss Wendy: Taking care of cats is hard work. Yes, it kept me young and healthy. We all know that philosophy is a course for those who never experienced life and hard work. Wendy, your jealous bone is sticking out and it's making you look like a hateful old hag.

Ken Miller, thanks for the tip. The ASPCA raises \$57 million a year. The CEO's total compensation was more than \$852,000 a year.

Approximately 1.5 million animals are euthanized (670,000 dogs and 860,000 cats) a year. One female cat and her offspring can be the source of 420,000 cats in seven years? Cats have three litters a year. Why God? Please spay and neuter your pets.

Evy Lysk

Benton

Don't monkey with escaped primates

While the risk of contracting illness from brief contact with newly imported monkeys may be minimal, the CDC letter was a reasonable effort to notify those affected of exactly what to do in an unfamiliar situation.

Prior to completing their quarantine period any non-human primate may be incubating disease-causing organisms, especially respiratory viruses. Some monkeys, especially macaques, carry a Herpes virus (simiae) also called "monkey B virus," which can be acquired from a bite or scratch. Fortunately this infection is rare but has a high mortality rate. From personal experience caring for monkeys

and studying viruses at the University of Illinois I can testify to their extreme combativeness when disturbed. This accounts for the recommendation not to try to capture the animals immediately. Protective clothing to protect against bites or scratches or secretions is a necessity.

Clyde Peeling's warnings about the difficulties of dealing with escaped monkeys was right on. More information about animal viruses that can jump species into humans is available at the National Library of Medicine.

JAMES GALLAGHER

Ph.D., Virologist
Danville

THE VIEW FROM WISCONSIN

Narcan belongs in schools

Back in November, we ran an article from one of our sister papers, the Ashland Daily Press. The story included interviews with emergency personnel about their use of Narcan to reverse opioid overdoses.

The results from Narcan are stunning. It's an immediate reversal of an overdose caused by heroin, fentanyl, morphine or other opioids. The person who overdosed still needs careful observation — the amount in their system may be enough to outlast the Narcan — but the lifesaving potential is clear. One of the people interviewed in November compared the effects to "Lazarus (coming) back from the dead."

Today we have a very different article from the Associated Press. It's from Hartford, Connecticut. A 13-year-old student died after apparently overdosing on fentanyl at school. The tragedy has renewed calls there to make sure Narcan is available in all schools. That's a path Wisconsin schools should follow.

We understand the reluctance to talk about the issue. No one wants to admit that there are drugs in schools, even though we all know there are. No one wants to think about the fact students may well use those drugs while at school, or that they can overdose there.

The age of the Connecticut student raises similar reactions. No one wants to think about children barely into their teens using drugs, much less students younger than them. It's far more comforting to think of student drug use as confined to a small, easily identified subset of soon-to-be-dropouts, if we think about it at all. But that's just not reality.

The mayor in Connecticut said the student's age meant overdose wasn't the first thing to come to mind when the school nurse reached the student. It didn't occur to the first responders who arrived soon after, either, and they had the Narcan that could have been lifesaving.

The reality is that students will almost inevitably encounter drugs at some point, and many will do so through their circles of friends. Addiction doesn't have a guaranteed look, either.

Schools are one of the comparatively few places where we should be able to depend on some form of observation at most times. It's a place where students and teachers are able to spot problems and respond quickly. That should, generally speaking, make it difficult for most overdoses to go undetected for long periods.

Quick detection is critical, and it is possible at schools. And, if the school nurses and administrators are trained in the use of Narcan and have access to it, they are well-positioned to respond. Having Narcan in school can save lives.

The National Association of School Nurses has pushed for Narcan to be in all schools since 2015. So does Ethan's Run Against Addiction, an advocacy group formed after a 25-year-old in Wisconsin died of a heroin overdose.

Some will probably object on the specious grounds that having Narcan provides a safety net that will encourage students to use drugs. They'll claim it runs counter to the anti-drug messages schools already have, and that it will muddle the issue. We don't buy those arguments.

Having mats in gym class doesn't encourage students to fall from equipment. Having materials other than asphalt or hard-packed dirt under playground equipment doesn't make falling off a slide more appealing. Safety nets are part and parcel of schools' approaches to any number of issues. They don't encourage bad behavior; they protect against mistakes.

Should any of this be necessary? Of course not. Nothing would make us happier than for a school to stock Narcan, train people to administer it, and never have to think about the issue again.

But we're talking about reality, not the way things should be. Drugs are in schools, and schools need to be ready to respond.