

‘Sophie’s choice, over and over’: Death panels are the new phase of the pandemic



Registered nurse Jack Kingsley attends to a COVID-19 patient at St. Luke’s Boise Medical Center in Idaho on Tuesday, Aug. 31, 2021. St. Luke’s Health System has paused certain elective surgeries and procedures because of increasing COVID-19 cases. (Kyle Green / The Associated Press)

Remember “death panels”? Well, they’re back, and this time, they’re real.

“Death panels” was a phrase coined by Sarah Palin, the folksy-talkin’ former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate. She imagined that Obamacare would cause health bureaucrats to ration out medical care, after first sitting in judgment of who was most deserving to receive it.

This was awarded the “Lie of the Year” in 2009, as it was nowhere in any

legislation. It was a right-wing fever dream.

But now a version of it has come true — in Idaho. Hospitals in northern Idaho are so flooded with COVID-19 patients that the state has declared an emergency, called “crisis standards of care.” It means when you show up to the emergency room, you may get treated based preferentially on who is most likely to live.

“If your mother has a heart attack, someone will have to assign her a point score designating how likely she is to survive,” the Idaho Falls Post Register wrote, describing the scheme last winter when it was first being contemplated. “If it isn’t high enough, she might not get an ICU bed, and a COVID patient will get it instead.

“We will ask the nurses and doctors who’ve broken their backs trying to save us to make that Sophie’s choice over, and over, and over.”

This past week the 200-bed hospital in Coeur d’Alene had 218 patients — so many it was treating patients in hallways and running out of oxygen to help them breathe, The Associated Press reported.

“What about the people who need emergency care but, because of the exploding COVID crisis here, can’t get it?” asked the Coeur d’Alene Press. “Do we just let them die?”

The answer to that is: “Yes.” Letting them die is actually the plan. The GOP governor of Idaho said it was “an unprecedented and unwanted point in the history of our state.” But he made no moves to try anything else, such as requiring vaccinations for anyone (he earlier had banned the governmental use of “vaccine passports” in the state). It’s a red state, and so for the most part they’re letting the virus rip and run.

Remember years ago when a tea party debate audience cheered the idea of letting someone without insurance die? What’s happening in Idaho is even worse because it’s so preventable.

Doctors in Idaho have said their COVID-19 patients are almost all unvaccinated. “We don’t have any vaccinated patients here,” an ICU doc in Boise told The Associated Press. “Misinformation is hurting people and killing people.”

Idaho ranks last in the percentage of its population having at least one dose of coronavirus vaccine, at only 45%. The U.S. is about 63%; Washington state 69%.

But Idaho is not the only place where the “death panel” concept is creeping into the conversation. The main hospital in Yakima is seeing a record number of COVID-19 patients, almost all unvaccinated. They’re raising the specter of rationing care there, too — something the chief medical officer said has never happened at the hospital.

“I sure hope we don’t get there, but that’s where we’re heading,” he warned in The Yakima Herald-Republic on Wednesday.

When I wrote last week about a COVID-19 skeptic and anti-vaxxer who had died of the disease, asking whether society should care, I heard from a slew of readers furious because their own medical care is being delayed or cut off — a diffuse version of the triage going on in Idaho.

“Am I angry? You bet I am,” wrote Mike Morrissey, of Snohomish, who says his cardiac surgery has been put off indefinitely due to a flood of COVID-19 patients. “My heart is failing without intervention. I can’t walk a block without stopping. But their choice [to not get vaccinated] just negated my urgent need.”

Echoed a nurse at a regional hospital: “They’re dying of stupidity by choice, but at the same time taking up space in the hospital and displacing stroke, cancer and cardiac patients.”

“Do I care what happens to those who won’t take a simple step to end this nightmare?” asked reader Jon Kraus, who said his brother-in-law had a surgery to fix a painful back condition put on hold due to COVID-19 levels. “I’m tired of catering to people who don’t care about anyone but themselves.”

This is why Gov. Jay Inslee and President Joe Biden suddenly feel more comfortable mandating the vaccine for groups of workers and businesses. Yes, the right-wing flank of the GOP will sue, march around in tri-corner hats and scream at their local school boards. But people are *done*. The vaccinated — the majority in most states — have had enough.

Now, as the workplace vax wars rev up, the best point to keep in mind is offered up by reader Michael Andreoni:

“Who I DO feel sorry for are the medical personnel who have to deal with this mess,” he wrote.

It’s the story of our time, how a pandemic that was visited upon us, through no fault of our own, ended up morphing into such a self-inflicted wound for America.

It didn’t take a tyrant or a deep state or a committee of banal bureaucrats to bring death panels to life, as Sarah Palin imagined in her fever dream. We willingly did it to ourselves.

Danny Westneat: dwestneat@seattletimes.com; Danny Westneat takes an opinionated look at the Puget Sound region’s news, people and politics.

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