

Opinion

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Vaccines, more test kits and cooperation will get us through

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Workers at a drive-up COVID-19 testing clinic administer PCR coronavirus tests on Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022, in Puyallup. People using the facility, which is being run by the Pierce County Department of Emergency Management, faced waits... (AP Photo / Ted S. Warren) **More** ✓

By [Umair A. Shah](#)

Special to The Times

As we embark on a fresh new year, I cannot help but reflect on all we went through as a state during 2021. For those who do not know me, I have served in the role of Secretary of Health for the great state of Washington for just over one year.

Being in this position at the time of a pandemic is noteworthy because it embodies the focus on health during a time of crisis where almost everything has been about COVID-19 itself or dealing with its impact. Thanks to our state's strong leadership and so many doing their part, we have one of the highest vaccination rates and one of the lowest death rates in the country. This would not be possible without the public's sacrifices and continued efforts to help us combat COVID, as well as the unremitting work our public health and health care workers have done — and continue to do.

Yet we know this road has not been easy. Even now, we are coming off the latest delta variant surge, with cold, wintry weather upon us and omicron taking aim at our state. We are tired of this virus, but it is not tired of us.

As an emergency department physician caring for our nation's veterans for more than 20 years in Texas, I had always been struck by the determination that my patients displayed, especially in their time of need. This came through even as patients suffered heart attacks, post-traumatic stress or acute injuries. It was never easy, but I remember back to so many patients who — even while going through unimaginable trauma or pain — still somehow managed to sneak in a smile, express a word of gratitude. That always struck me as so selfless and honestly, while I did not always appreciate it, it inspired me to give even more when seemingly I could not give any more.

Fast forward to today. So many Washingtonians have given me, my team, people like us throughout our public health and health care system across our state, support, inspiration, hope. It has sustained us and allowed us to persevere as we continue to serve.

As I was assuming my responsibilities, COVID-19 vaccines were arriving in our state. The early days are largely a blur with myriad challenges that tested even the best of planning as this pandemic sent us curveballs left and right. But here we are one year later with more than 75% of our population (12 years and older) fully vaccinated and more than 12 million doses of vaccines administered.

Taking a step back, where would we be if these lifesaving vaccines were not available, and we had to go it alone like 2020, with only masks and avoiding each other? Vaccines have not solved everything by any stretch, especially when they became politicized. For me, it is not a “red-blue” issue, it is a medical one. We know those who are vaccinated and boosted are most able to protect themselves and those around them from this horrible pandemic.

Now with omicron taking aim at our communities and our health systems, it will likely get darker before we see brighter times ahead. The demand for testing reached new heights in December. Despite national supply chain hurdles, we are working to secure additional tests as quickly as possible and expect a few million at-home tests to be delivered to our state over the next couple weeks. Meanwhile, the more of us who get vaccinated and boosted — and I implore people to do just that and not wait — and do the common-sense things to keep health and safety in mind in everything we do, the more likely we are to make it past this dark time.

Just like my patients in the emergency department showed grit and determination, that is exactly what I have seen from Washingtonians this past year. When we work together, there is no limit to what we can accomplish. Yet given how things stand, we should be concerned with what happens when we do not.

We often vent our frustration on what has not gone as planned or what this pandemic has done to us (or we have done to each other), but instead I choose to stay optimistic and hopeful. Indeed, that is what new years and new beginnings are all about, after all.

Umair A. Shah is the Secretary of Health for Washington state.

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