Behind the MASK

Questions about confidentiality arise with COVID-19 cases

Sophomore Molly Black thought she knew what to expect. After all, she had heard the stories, read the articles, and seen the headlines on the news. It was basically the flu, right? Yet, like many others who contracted the virus, she never saw COVID-19 coming.

"I didn't think I had it at all," Molly said. "I thought it was a false positive because my symptoms weren't there. I kept waiting for them, but they never came. Eventually, I had a runny nose, but that was about it."

If she hadn't been tested, Molly never would have known she had become a part of the pandemic, but it wasn't something she kept quiet.

Because of medical privacy laws, information about COVID-19 is limited to the number of positive cases and where the exposure occurred. Unless the infected person talks about it, only physicians and direct family members will ever know their name, creating a culture of secrecy and rumors.

"I personally don't mind people knowing," said freshman Ava Keyes, who had the more typical symptoms of chills, body aches and headache. "It's important so they can know if they're at risk or not."

However, the school cannot legally release any information that would make it possible to identify a student or teacher who tests positive.

The district policy is to notify the campus whenever a student or staff member tests positive. The notification includes the date of the positive test, the last date the person was on campus, and the level of risk for the students on campus. It does not include personally identifiable information.

"The district's goal is to keep our students and staff safe," superintendent Chad Pirtle said. "Anyone we believe was in 'close contact' with the person who tested positive is also notified by phone to ensure they are aware of the close contact."

Many times when those phone calls are made, the people who may have been exposed already know the details of the situation and many times are friends, Mr. Pirtle said.

Even with information about close contact situations, a COVID-19 diagnosis is sometimes a surprise to a person who tests positive..

"I have no idea how I got it," Ava said. "I followed the mask rules and everything."

Others, however, were sure they had it before their tests. While she never wanted to have it, fifth grade teacher Brooke Coleman was almost expecting it. After all, when the world is in a pandemic, illness is almost unavoidable.

"I had already thought that maybe I would have it," Mrs. Coleman said. "Mentally, I was prepared to have it. I'm really laid back, so I was just kind of 'if I get it, I get it.'"

However, like so many people worldwide, there wasn't a precaution that fifth grade teacher Susan Maynard didn't take to avoid being exposed. Quarantine, sanitization, masks, cleaning, whatever it took to protect themselves and their loved ones. Until that, too, became uncertain.

"I took all the precautions,"Mrs. Maynard said. "I made [my family] wash their hands all the time, I made them wear a mask, I made them not go around in large groups, and I still got it."

The fear of the virus didn't stop at just getting it, however. For teachers, the first day of school is one of the most important days all year. Meeting students, hearing about summer activities, and getting to start the school year are all things teachers look forward to all year. But corona virus on the first day brought all of that to a pause.

"I cried at the emergency room because I knew I was going to miss the first seven days of school," Mrs. Maynard said. "I was really afraid of missing school and having to go to the hospital, like on a ventilator."

Despite the strict guidelines the district follows to protect student and staff identify, word does get out from friends passing the news on to others.

"My friends did tell other people. It didn't spread ridiculously fast, but there were people I barely knew that knew I had it, but I really don't care," sophomore Olivia Edwards said. "I believe it's important because just sitting next to someone in class can be dangerous. And people who have been near me deserve to know so they can get tested, especially if there is someone close to them who is high risk.

"I understand that some people want privacy, but sometimes you have to look at the bigger picture."

it's a matter of privacy

What's HIPAA?

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or HIPAA, is a federal law that protects healthcare patients from having their secured information and data released by their providers. It was passed in 1996 to resolve issues dealing with continuing health coverage for people who lost their jobs, reducing healthcare fraud, and protecting confidential information.

716,000 cases of COVID-19 diagnosed in Texas as of 9/22

1,260 cases of COVID-19 diagnosed in Bowie County of 9/22

Information from Texas Department of State Health Services website

" "With HIPAA, you don't want to violate anyone's personal health information. It's the same thing for any hospital, clinic, or other healthcare facility. HIPAA cannot be violated, wherever you are."

-Stephanie Fincher, health science teacher

" These precautions are important to protect private information of a student or staff member who is dealing with COVID-19 while still getting the information out to our campus community.I believe our district has done a great job of using precautions in regards to protecting our people.

-Chad Pirtle, Superintendent

Cadence Pov
reporter

Gillian Knowles
reporter

0.5% of students have tested positive for COVID-19

of student positive cases result from a family member testing positive first
70-80%

0% of students and staff have been hospitalized for COVID-19

For more information, click on the COVID-19 link on the pgisd. net website. There you will find 3 things: An After-Hours Protocol (this is for scenarios that may occur outside of school and what they need to do) an Exposure Flowchart (shows what steps to take if an exposure has occurred) and a FAQ page (answers to common questions concerning Covid)

Information provided by PGISD