

# The First Case: A Timeline

BY MELISSA MERCER HOWELL

**EDMOND INTERNIST SUSAN DIMICK, M.D.**, believes in the power of humor, especially in the midst of a pandemic when gloves and facemasks are standard protocol. That's why she greets her patients these days wearing a cowboy hat, a bandana over her face and a faux-sinister, "Reach for the sky, partner!"



WEDNESDAY  
MARCH 4

Oklahoma has no reported cases of the virus and test kits have not arrived in the state. Dimick had just returned from a medical conference in Denver.

A patient arrives at her office with complaints of weakness, chills and no appetite. She is older than 60.

"We took her temperature, and it was 99.9, which, in the medical world is not considered a fever. A fever starts at 100.4. But it means something," Dimick says.

But the patient also had just returned from Florida. "There had been a number of cases in (Florida) and actually had been some deaths in a nursing home. So, I asked her about exposures there, and she said she had spent a lot of time in the airport and was on a plane with a lot of people ... who were coughing and sneezing."

FRIDAY  
MARCH 6

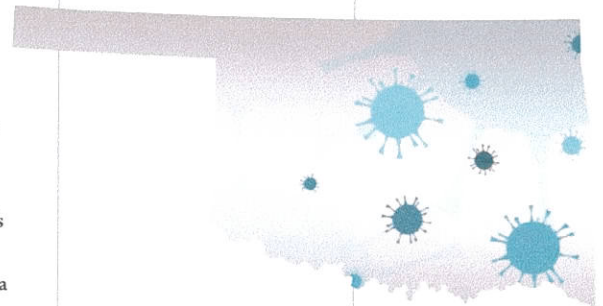
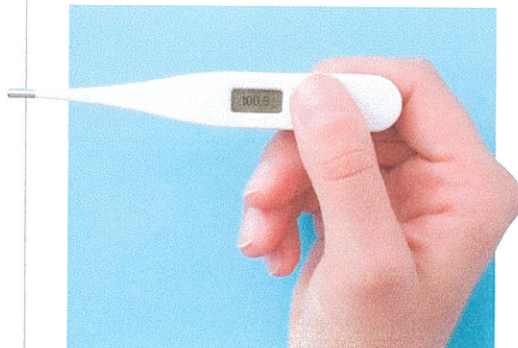
Oklahoma has one reported case of COVID-19 in Tulsa. New York and Washington are beginning to see cases spiral as health departments across the country begin scrambling to prepare. Dimick's patient returns with worsening symptoms. Her temperature is 100.8. Her symptoms now include a cough and shortness of breath.

"We examined her and sent her to get a chest x-ray and did a flu screen. My diagnosis was that she was having bronchitis," Dimick says. "Because she is asthmatic and is older than 60, we started her on treatment for asthma."

Dimick's suspicions are beginning to grow. She calls the state health department to report her patient's symptoms and is told tests are not available but would be delivered on Monday.

Dimick talks to the patient several times over the weekend as she becomes sicker.

"At that time, there was an index of suspicion. We were starting to hear about (COVID-19) every day," Dimick says. "She was getting really terrified. I kept saying, 'This is a possibility. We have no way to test. I'll talk to the health department on Monday.'"



MONDAY  
MARCH 9

There are two confirmed positive cases of COVID-19 in Oklahoma. The Oklahoma State Department of Health laboratory receives test kits from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and begins validating that the test kits work. It also adopts CDC guidelines on who can be tested based on symptoms and travel history.

Dimick calls the Department of Health and requests a COVID-19 test, but is told she must do more respiratory testing to rule out other illnesses.

TUESDAY  
MARCH 10

Dimick's patient returns for more respiratory testing.

"She was so sick that she was not going anywhere, but her husband, who was taking care of her, was going to (work) every day," Dimick says. "We took her swabs, we sent everything off, called back (the testing lab), and everything was negative."



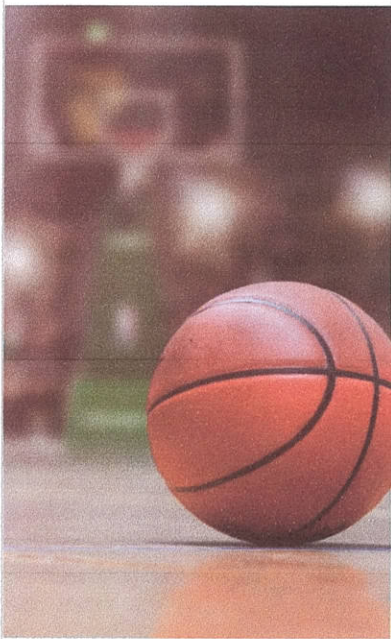
"We might as well laugh," she says. "It's good for the immune system."

But humor isn't the only reason she's wearing a face covering. One of Dimick's patients was the first person in Oklahoma County to be diagnosed with COVID-19. Although she has completed a two-week quarantine following the diagnosis, she's still being careful.

### WEDNESDAY MARCH 11

Before the tipoff of the Oklahoma City Thunder-Utah Jazz game in OKC, a player on the Jazz tested positive for COVID-19. The game is called off and frustrated fans are sent home. The health department uses 58 of its 250 available test kits to test the two basketball teams.

An epidemiologist calls Dimick's office and requests more tests in compliance with CDC guidelines. The patient, now extremely ill, has blood drawn at a local lab.



### THURSDAY MARCH 12

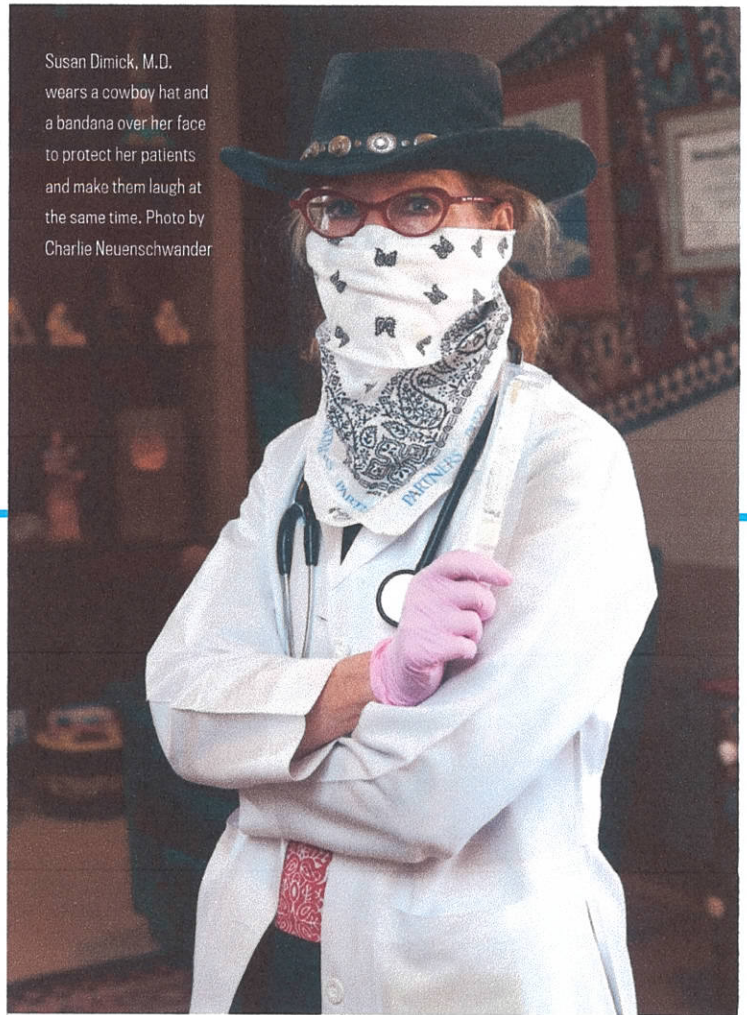
Dimick receives the second round of test results, which indicate the patient is positive for mononucleosis, rubella, herpes, toxoplasma and more. Her patient's temperature is now 104 degrees.

"They came back looking very bizarre. We learned a lot. When you do blood tests on people with this disease, everything comes back high, which made it difficult to interpret," she says.

OSDH agrees to run the test. The final task required was an oral swab. Dimick asks her patient to return once more.

"I went out to the parking lot, because she was too weak to get out of the car. I wore my hazmat gear and did an (oral) swab on her," she says.

Susan Dimick, M.D. wears a cowboy hat and a bandana over her face to protect her patients and make them laugh at the same time. Photo by Charlie Neuenschwander



### FRIDAY MARCH 13

A courier arrives at 7:30 a.m. to collect the swabs, with a promise to call by the end of the day if the results are positive. The family calls Dimick's office all day, but results are not available. At 4:30 p.m., Dimick calls the health department. The results are presumptive positive.

At 9:30 p.m. that evening, the health department announces Oklahoma County has confirmed its first positive case of COVID-19.

### CONCLUSION

By Sunday, March 15, five more cases are confirmed. The following Tuesday, St. Patrick's Day, Mayor David Holt declares a state of emergency for Oklahoma City, limiting public gatherings and closing restaurants, bars, gyms and other businesses.

In the days that followed, the patient's family was tested for the virus. Her husband, son, daughter-in-law and their baby daughter all tested positive for the disease. None developed symptoms.

As for the patient, she has recovered and is feeling well again. She and her family are donating antibodies to help create a vaccine.