Reflections of the COVID-19 pandemic

As Chief Infection Prevention Officer, Dr. Ravi Vemuri guides the response to the COVID-19 virus for MercyOne Des Moines and West Des Moines Medical Centers. Dr. Vemuri shares his thoughts on the pandemic, and what’s to come.

As an infectious disease physician, how challenging has COVID-19 been?
COVID-19 has been an extremely challenging disease. As a new pathogen, we gained experience as we cared for patients. Initially, there was very little information to go on. As we learned more about the virus there became a torrent of information to sort through; it was almost as bad as having no information. As an infectious disease department, we use the best information at the time to make decisions on care. COVID-19 created such fast-moving scenarios that we would make care decisions, and within three days we had to change processes that were the 180-degree opposite. We continue revising our processes to provide the best and safest care.

What impressed you about MercyOne’s response to COVID-19?
I have been really impressed with the teamwork in the initial phases of care and as we continue. Dr. Joel Ward and his crew from Information Technology provided us with new telehealth tools to reduce the number of daily physician visits to patients in the hospital. This saved major amounts of PPE that was in short supply. The system was set up with amazing speed. My critical care colleagues were impressive in delivering care and managing so much information. Our critical care nurses really stepped up. They had to bear the brunt of the daily care of critically ill people and constant change. Sharing information was no small task. Dr. Wilcox created a Google document he regularly updated, and everyone contributed their knowledge. This was our playbook and we all had access to it. Dr. Afroze and Jeff Brock used it to develop protocols that included the latest therapies and medications.

With spikes in positive COVID-19 tests, have we entered a new wave?
Many epidemiologists compare the COVID-19 pandemic to a baseball game. In a 9-inning game, we’re in the second or third inning. Sheltering in place, social distancing and wearing masks slowed the virus down by reducing person-to-person transfer. In June we saw good progress, but it wasn’t long enough to end the first wave.

Do you think the public has become apathetic about COVID-19?
I think a segment of the population has become precisely that. You see larger groups without masks not practicing social distancing in larger settings. Outside of Iowa we are seeing a resurgence of the virus at a much higher level than before. Houston, Texas, is now in the same position New York City was in, and it’s tragic.

Are you concerned about having COVID-19 and the flu season at the same time?
This fall we will have to worry about the flu and RSV virus, in addition to COVID-19. As physicians we will have to assume patients have COVID-19 until proven otherwise through testing. I am concerned this could overrun urgent cares, emergency rooms and doctors’ offices. The public can help. When flu vaccine becomes available, everyone — without exception — should get a flu shot to decrease infections and reduce pressure on the medical system.
Project Forward at MercyOne

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed many challenges. In addition to the overall stress it has placed on colleagues and resources, MercyOne has also experienced a significant financial impact. To provide guidance and recommendations to MercyOne’s leadership to adjust our strategic and operational plans to ensure continued the delivery of personalized and high-quality care, the organization launched Project Forward. Learn more and get the latest information at MercyOne.org/ProjectForward.

Objectives of Project Forward:

1. Develop strategies to positively impact colleagues, providers and consumers.
2. Identify opportunities to adjust the scope and size of our operating plan.
3. Develop a virtual care strategy to foster growth, while providing personalized and convenient service.
4. Optimize the ambulatory structure across MercyOne.

Game Show Gala sponsors step up

The MercyOne House of Mercy Game Show Gala, presented by Nationwide, is MercyOne Des Moines Foundation’s annual signature event, having raised more than $2.7 million for House of Mercy since 2010. This year’s Gala was cancelled due to the pandemic. However, 24 sponsors stepped up to continue to support House of Mercy. A total of $116,000 was raised to fund vital substance abuse and mental health services and needs for the organization’s inpatient and outpatient clients.

CyberKnife virtual dedication held

On Thursday, June 25, physicians at MercyOne Des Moines Cancer Center unveiled a new CyberKnife® S7™ System, the first and only robotic and radiosurgery system in Iowa. Watch a video of remarks made by Richard Deming, MD, MercyOne Des Moines Cancer Center Medical Director. As of July 9, more than 56,000 people have been reached through the online recording of the event, with 66,855 video views.

Pictured L to R: Phil Harrop, Chief Operations Officer, MercyOne West Des Moines Medical Center and Vice President, MercyOne Des Moines Medical Center; Trey Wiegand, Radiation Oncology Manager; Dr. Richard Deming, Medical Director, MercyOne Des Moines Cancer Center; Tim Hackbart, Market Director, Oncology; Karl Keeler, President, MercyOne Central Iowa