Unsung heroes: Des Moines Laboratory microbiology team

During the past seven months, MercyOne colleagues from all departments have had to change their daily workflow in different ways, stemming from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The microbiology team working in the MercyOne Des Moines Laboratory have risen to the occasion to provide rapid COVID-19 testing, performing more than 7,800 tests since March, providing care for our most emergent patients without having to reschedule to allow for the 24-48 hour turnaround time for processing testing results through MercyOne’s collaboration with Corteva Agriscience.

In-house testing options currently available at MercyOne Des Moines Medical Center include the Cepheid 90-minute test, reserved for the most emergent patients due to the limited supply, and DiaSorin, a 2-4 hour test used for employee testing, same-day surgical needs and other non-emergent, but still serious circumstances.

Jill Noble, manager of Lab Special Services, works with the microbiology team on a daily basis and sees firsthand how flexible they’ve had to be as the need for rapid testing increases.

“The entire team has kept consumer experience at the forefront of their minds,” Noble said. “They’ve continued managing their regular tasks while adding daily rapid COVID testing to their workload. The team has remained flexible throughout ongoing changes in testing, and their diligent work has saved many lives.”

The microbiology team doesn’t seem to be slowing down anytime soon, as limited supplies of a Biofire Respiratory Panel with an added COVID-19 target went live Aug. 18, 2020. This test produces a quick diagnoses of specific respiratory infections, which present with nearly identical symptoms. This fall, Cepheid will be replacing its standalone COVID-19 test with a 4-plex panel, targeting influenza A, influenza B, RSV and COVID. This new test doesn’t have an exact timeline, as it is still pending FDA EUA clearance.

Karl Keeler, president of MercyOne Central Iowa, recognizes the Be One approach within the microbiology team: “One of the most important aspects of addressing this pandemic is testing for the virus, allowing for swift identification and treatment, and immediate isolation to prevent spread. The microbiology team has worked tirelessly to ensure MercyOne continues to provide our patients the excellent care they expect and deserve, during a time of immense demand for lab services. Through collaboration and countless hours of hard work, these colleagues have strengthened MercyOne. And for that, we should all be appreciative.”

Medical lab technician Rachel Kramme sets up a Cepheid COVID-19 test.

September is Lymphoma Cancer Awareness Month

Cancer trials offer medical advancement, improved health outcomes

Many patients are not aware of the growing opportunities to participate in new cancer clinical trials. And that’s where MercyOne Des Moines Cancer Center research team steps in.
Lymphoma Cancer Awareness Month
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“These trials offer qualifying cancer patients the opportunity to participate in research that can help advance cancer prevention, diagnosis, treatment or symptom control,” said Jessica Ellensohn, DNP, MercyOne Des Moines Cancer Center research team member. “People can contact us directly to check on clinical trials they might be eligible for, or they may be referred by their doctors.”

The research team’s efforts make a real difference in the lives of others, including patient Jim Hilgren and his follicular lymphoma treatment. Follicular lymphoma is a type of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, a cancer that sometimes doesn’t require treatment for years. Hilgren’s, however, needed to be addressed right away. He had traditional chemotherapy every three weeks for six months.

When the cancer returned after six months, Hilgren was entered into a study combining immunotherapy with a different type of chemotherapy. Immunotherapy clinical trials may represent the greatest hope for those currently facing cancer, and is increasingly available for early stage cancers, or as a first-line treatment option as clinical research rapidly progresses.

So far, the results for Hilgren have been a dramatic improvement, with far fewer side effects than traditional chemotherapy. “I now take an oral medication 21 days of each month, and I get an infusion once a month that has chemotherapy and an immunotherapy treatment,” he said. The immunotherapy medication marks his cancer cells and recruits his body’s natural immune defenses to kill the marked cells.

“I feel so much better... I have very little nausea. I didn’t lose my hair and I just have more energy to get things done,” Hilgren continued. “I’m so grateful for the ability to be a part of this study group. This treatment with immunotherapy has made a huge difference to me.”

Most studies are for patients with breast, lung or blood cancers, but new ones are always being started. In 2019, 124 MercyOne patients participated, and that number continues to grow in 2020.

Take your shot: top three reasons to get a flu vaccine
This year, more than any other, protecting against respiratory viruses is key for health and well-being. Flu vaccine clinics are coming to MercyOne and it’s important for all colleagues, students, volunteers, contractors, etc., to participate. (View the schedule for onsite flu vaccine clinics.)

This year, MercyOne is providing the Flublok vaccine, which provides protection against four different flu viruses, and three times the amount of antigen than standard flu vaccines. If that’s not enough, here are three other great reasons for you to “take your shot.”

1. **You’ll avoid more serious symptoms.** Effectiveness varies from year to year, but if you do come down with the flu, by having had the influenza vaccine, the severity of your symptoms will be lessened and you’ll be less likely to experience a more alarming related illness, such as pneumonia or a complication of an existing chronic medical condition.

2. **Others will thank you.** The flu vaccine isn’t just about keeping you healthy. It also protects the people with whom you interact – family, friends, neighbors, colleagues, patients and visitors. If you don’t get the flu, then others can’t catch it from you.

3. **You’ll help protect community resources.** As the seasons change, we face threats of influenza and COVID-19 outbreaks, both having the potential to put great strain on health care system resources. Being vaccinated for the flu will help reduce community spread and lessen the burden placed on our hospitals and clinics.