

VMG COVID-19 UPDATE

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Issue #

I hope everyone had a good weekend. We all need to recharge.

IF YOU WANT TO THINK MORE ABOUT THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM AND WHAT CAN BE DONE...

Here's a link to a *Washington Post* article on "smart solutions to mitigate the effects of COVID-19. Some of these seem like winners.

https://link.zixcentral.com/u/00198225/lmBh70B36hGX9okz9u_1Kq?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.washingtonpost.com%2Fopinions%2F2020%2F03%2F20%2Fcoronavirus-is-upending-society-here-are-ideas-mitigate-its-impact%2F

COVID-19 CASES AROUND THE STATE COMPARED TO FRANKLIN AND HAMPSHIRE COUNTIES.

The Boston Globe had a graphic over the weekend showing cases of COVID-19 on a state map, county by county. (I tried to copy it here but it would not copy – you can check for it in copies of the Globe on Sunday). It was striking and showed that neighboring counties were much higher than our two counties. Of course, we don't know why that is (it might just be a matter of fewer tests being done in our counties). Death rates also were less.

That our counties report fewer cases might be seen as some "good news." **But please do not let down on your/our social distancing, masking, hand-washing, "don't touch your face efforts." We still have a long way to go before the pandemic winds down and we'll need to maintain our vigilance for many months.** Some projections now have the new cases winding down through June but that still means a lot of illness and potential loss. We're working with community groups and the local hospital systems on preparing and participating in "surge plans" (helping out) should they be needed.

VMG Virtual Visits

I talked with Karen Brown, a reporter for NPR, this morning about a story she was doing on how the pandemic was affecting primary care. As we were talking it was clear that we have essentially turned our approach inside out in the span of 3 weeks (going from "we'll see you in the office for that" to "we'll see you by virtual visit and at your convenience"). That's a lot of change in a short time. And we're hearing that, in many cases, patients really appreciate it. Here's a quote from John Prinziavalli, DPT about his experience in Physical Therapy:

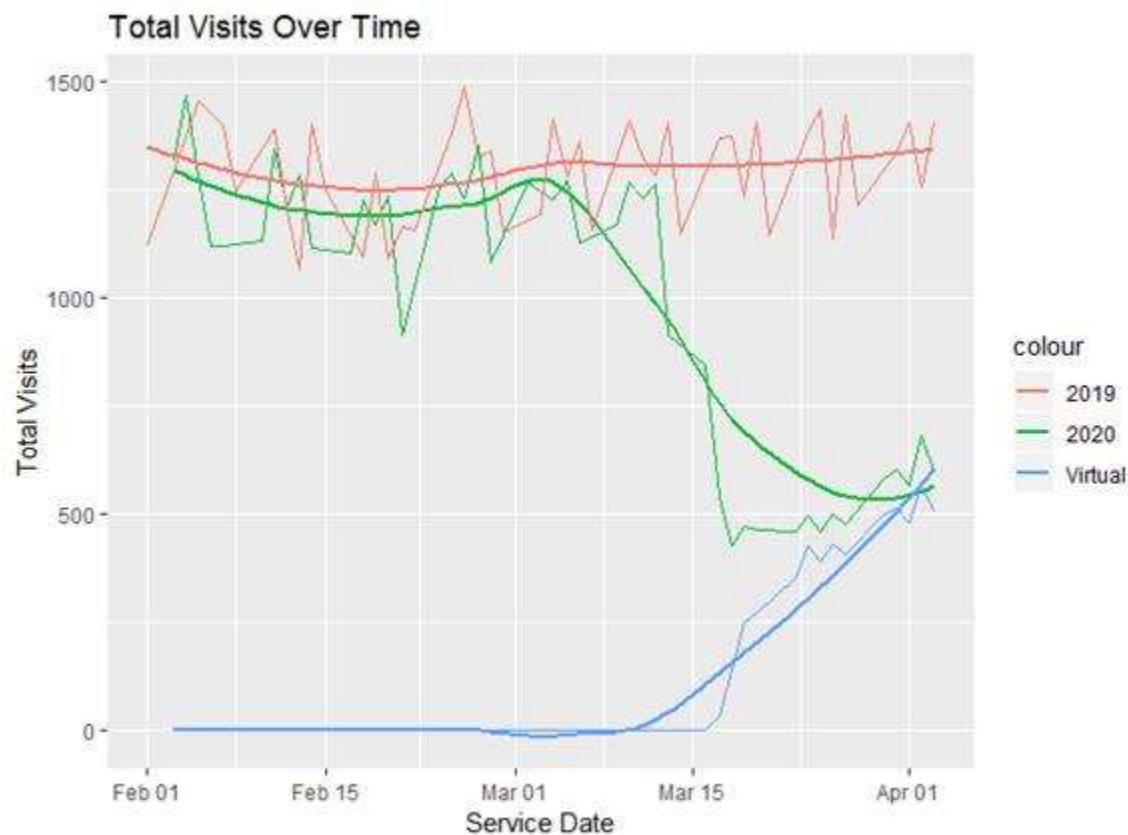
"When I first heard we were doing virtual visits I was very doubtful about what this was going to accomplish and how effective this was going to be. After doing this for a few weeks I have been surprised and pleased at just how much we can get done. Certainly we have doxy, and Zoom but for those who are less tech savvy the phone and Face Time has proven to be clinically effective. To date I

personally have treated an acute post reduction shoulder dislocation, a post quad tendon rupture and repair, patella femoral syndrome, low back and knee pain. Certainly there are limitations by not having your hands on folks but with some creativity and time we can be effective clinically.

I hope is some way you may find this reassuring about what we can still do; it's certainly opened my eyes to other treatment possibilities."

Virtual Visits Compared to In-person Visits

Here's a chart, prepared by Isaac Allen our Data Analyst, showing how our total Virtual Visits (total for all VMG) are increasing since we began. The thicker red line shows our face to face visits for 2019. The thicker green line shows our face to face visits in 2020. The thicker blue line shows our virtual visits this year since February. You can see quick and continuing increase of virtual visits as our face to face visits declines quite a lot.



This is a good trend because much of our FFS revenue comes from Office Visits. As they go down, we lose a lot of revenue. Virtual Visits are mainly paid similar to Office Visits so we are potentially replacing much of that lost revenue which, of course, we need. We'll have more information on how significant this is in the next couple of weeks as the bills get paid by the commercial and government payers.

Copays, Coinsurance, and Deductibles for Virtual Visits

Because of concern about social distancing and helping people to stay at home, the Governor's Office and the Division of Insurance in Massachusetts have directed that most patient copay, coinsurance, and deductibles should not apply during the pandemic (for COVID related services and other healthcare services we offer as well). The same is true for Medicare. However, the health plans have not completed adjusting their systems for these changes yet and we're hearing that some patients, after being told by us that they would have no patient responsibility for virtual visits, are being charged for some patient responsibility once their claims are processed by their health plans.

While we expect this to be resolved soon, we want to be clear that we don't have the authority to "waive copays" so please don't use that language. Look for a message from Billing on what to say and on the resolution of this issue. Patients can also always be referred to their health plans for coverage questions.

Services at VMG during COVID: Rheumatology

Our Rheumatologists, Drs. Brown and Maroun, are both seeing new and established patients and consults almost exclusively by virtual visits. A few patients with acute need are being seen in the health centers after being triaged by the practitioners and their staff.

Their schedules are being converted from previously scheduled in-person visits to virtual so they do have room ("there's room for Rheum") for patients and will welcome referrals.

General Reactions to Handling the Stress of the Pandemic and the "Learning Curve"

John Novo passed this graphic on to me. It shows how people move to adjust to the stresses of working (and living) in the age of COVID-19 and how we develop and learn about our roles and "who we want to be." It also helps to define some things about what it means to "be Mindful."



Good news is that we already see many of our colleagues and our Group moving in the right direction. We hear every day of how people are “jumping in” to help teammates triage, schedule, see patients, work lists, keep the buildings clean, keep the operations and finances growing and adapting, etc.

Finally on this note, here's a quote from Fred Rogers:

“In times of stress, the best thing we can do for each other is to listen with our ears and our hearts and to be assured that our questions are just as important as our answers.”

And some good ideas from the Fred Rogers center for how to help children during this time:

<https://www.fredrogerscenter.org/what-we-do/child-wellness/coronavirus-response>

Finally for today:

Bill Withers died last week (of heart disease, not COVID-19). Here's a different take on what standing together means:

<https://link.zixcentral.com/u/f6924a98/b11K2Zl26hGYkfkmh3soMg?u=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3D2YapAxPfRyI>

Be Patient; Be Mindful.

Thanks again,

Joel

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