

VMG COVID-19 UPDATE

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I hear the phrase “new normal” all the time now. I heard this plane overhead near my house. We’re in the woods. Most airplane noise is distant but this was doing loops, engine stalls (sounded that way) and noisy. So what bothered me? Not the noise. It was the normalcy of it. This plane comes every spring day (and summer and fall), kind of like the bears. And the contrast between life going on and life mothballed was striking.

This is where we are. The normal things like birds, flowers coming up, trees budding and the “new normal” things like no traffic, no school, and (almost) no in-person patient visits. Not too hard to social distance when there are only 10 people on a floor of a building meant for 50-100.

Summer will be here soon.

And then there’s the tortuous political scene. Quite the contrast between the heroic and courageous “front-line” workers and the inept politicians, scammers and conspiracy theorists.

National and State Scene

Some states are reopening. We’ll see what the results of those experiments are. Massachusetts, as a state, is not reopening at least through May. We’re still near the peak of infections. Hospitalizations seem to be improving but we’ll know more next week.

Some communities are getting tougher. Somerville will be fining people \$300 for being in a public space, indoor or outdoor, without a mask. On the other hand, they are also offering “on-demand” testing for anyone. Just walk in.

Testing, in general, while improving slowly, is nowhere near the scale it needs to be. Dr. Fauci is talking about *at least* doubling the current availability and rate across the country. Massachusetts is testing more than most other states and so our rates of infection may be higher because we know about and can see more. It’s probably higher still.

Regional

In Franklin and Hampshire counties, our hospitals are still reporting availability in ICU and other beds.

Drive in/up testing for virus is available now in both our counties through the hospital systems, still on referral and by appointment.

At VMG

From Gina: "The VMG Lab Team has done an outstanding job of redesigning the work to be able to perform mobile lab draws, outside the health centers to meet the needs of our patients for urgent lab work. The team continues to revise their procedures to ensure safety for all."

Mobile lab draws are for urgent and semi-urgent labs determined to be needed by a practitioner and disease management labs for our diabetic patients. All labs must be scheduled, no walk in appointments are available. The phlebotomy team is also able to go to radiology or the respiratory unit as needed to draw a patient with urgent lab needs to minimize traffic in the center. We'll be scaling this capacity up in the next few weeks and months as we learn what works and what does not work as well.

I continue to hear reports of incredible teamwork and devotion to patients. Reception was challenged today in Northampton due to staffing. Early this morning, colleagues from around the company got together, pitched in and arranged for coverage just in time. Thanks to everyone for coming together.

In Amherst late last week, the clinical team in the center that late afternoon worked together for a newly diagnosed diabetic patient who needed urgent treatment and training in managing his disease. In addition to bringing him in with the now "new normal" cautions, starting an IV, treating his ketoacidosis, providing medication and support, he also was taught the basics of caring for himself with his new illness. Staff stayed late (around 6, I think) to make sure he could go home safely. Because of everyone's efforts, he was able to avoid an unpleasant ER visit. Thanks to everyone for coming together.

I saw an article on line in The Boston Globe over the weekend by Hannah Krueger. She was writing about, Liz Adams, from Alabama who drove north in this pandemic to take a position at MGH as a travel nurse. This is most of the article.

"My dad passed away suddenly last year. I watched the amazing care he got, and I've felt so empty since. I saw what was happening, and I realized I could be the person to treat a patient like they treated my father, especially because family cannot be with patients right now," she said.

"I get chill bumps even saying it. As someone whose father was in their shoes, that's everything to me," said Adams. "We're not doing it to put on a show — there is no one there to even impress — we are doing it because it is the right thing to do."

To date, with just 5,654 positive tests, the entire state of Alabama has registered fewer coronavirus cases than Suffolk County alone. Just 197 have died statewide. Adams admits that for many in Alabama, the reports out of New York and Boston differ greatly from their own experience, meaning "you can't help but wonder if this is all being exaggerated."

But now she sees daily consequences of a contagion allowed to spread and how quickly and mercilessly the virus can ravage patients. The ICU unit is full of worst-case scenarios and patients teetering on the brink. Those fortunate enough to recover even slightly are moved to step-down units and replaced by more dire cases. Adams's Facebook posts double as a form of catharsis and a way to give her friends and family a voice they can trust. "I've seen sick. . . . This is different. It hurts me when people say this is just like pneumonia or it's not that bad. Because no it is not. No the hell it is not," she said, her voice shaky.

Travel nursing assignments typically last 13 weeks, but the length of COVID positions is contingent on the trajectory of the outbreak. Analysts at Mass. General believe that the crush of very sick patients at its doors is unlikely to get worse, but data still show 100 to 150 state residents dying daily from the virus. Adams, who added two weeks to her contract Monday, plans to return to Huntsville mid-May.”

More heroes in the world, speaking up, pitching in, coming together.

Thanks again for all you are doing for our patients, our communities, and each other.

And hey, wash your hands (a lot), don't touch your face, maintain social distancing (it's working), wear a mask.

Joel

Be patient; be mindful

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