

Tuesday, March 24th, 2020

A medical supply shortage could happen. Here's what 'conservation mode' looks like at the region's hospitals.



Virginia Hospital Center is among the region's hospitals preserving personal protective equipment, worn here by medical staff at its coronavirus testing site.

Greater Washington's acute-care facilities are getting ready for the expected patient surge fueled by the novel coronavirus pandemic. Part of that preparation? A concerted effort to conserve supplies — using protective gear only when necessary and cutting down on the number of people exposed to patients — to ensure the equipment lasts.

The region's hospitals are also taking much closer inventory of equipment such as ventilators and respirators, drugs like Albuterol inhalers, testing kits and personal protective equipment, or PPE, which includes masks, eye shields and gowns.

That's crucial, because an influx of cases could hit at any time, whether hospitals are stocked up or not, according to Dr. Jeff DiLisi, Virginia Hospital Center's chief medical officer.

The Arlington hospital's leadership team is now holding morning and afternoon meetings, in addition to DiLisi's daily updates, on this very issue. VHC officials look at supply each day to determine, "how do we conserve that inventory so we make sure it lasts as long as possible," informed by expected shipments — and understanding what might be delayed, which changes as the situation evolves, he said.

Those updates come to medical staff — about 3,900 people — through a daily briefing email, with recommendations about what equipment to use and how, per Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

"What's a challenge for us, and I'm sure it's a challenge for everybody, is you don't know exactly how much of any one product we're going to continue to get shipped over the next two months," DiLisi said. "A lot of these PPE are actually produced in China, right in the place where this whole thing started, so there's a lot of concerns about the supply chain and what is going to be coming to us."

'Conservation mode' for masks, other equipment

Conservation efforts are also top of mind at Children's National in the District, because while kids aren't as vulnerable as adults to COVID-19 — diagnoses are low and positive cases tend to have good outcomes — PPE is vital to protect health system employees, and other medical equipment remains important for patients.

The pediatric nonprofit has enough protective gear to manage patient volumes and keep staff safe for now, "but we are doing our best to make sure that we're also conserving, because it's critical we all play a role in how we conserve our PPE, for the nation, quite frankly," said Kathy Gorman, Children's National's chief operating officer and executive vice president for patient care services.

Another tactic: Keeping COVID cases out, if possible

Children's National has also partnered with Trinity Washington University to open a COVID-19 drive-up collection and testing site in Northeast D.C. for pediatric patients referred by their doctors, a week after VHC did something similar with Arlington County. It's a move that will help keep patients out of the emergency department unnecessarily and further conserve protective equipment — because whether a patient has the disease dictates what PPE medical staff require, Gorman said.

Gorman's team continues to look at creative solutions, to ensure that doctors, nurses and other care team personnel have the appropriate equipment, she said. "So we're managing very tightly, we have very tight metrics on this every day, and we have oftentimes two to three huddles or steering committees that are meeting on an ongoing basis to look at what's happening, almost on an hour by hour basis."

At Novant Health UVA Health System, leadership has developed surge protocols to support the hospitals' clinical teams ahead of expected demand increases, and created advanced triage stations in tents outside of the ERs, according to Dr. Stephen Smith, president and chief operating officer of the system's Prince William and Haymarket medical centers. "We continue to monitor our supply utilization to ensure we can scale up as needed," he said in an email to the WBJ.

It's an issue reflected nationally, as the country's hospitals wait for equipment to be replenished by the national stockpile, something Federal Emergency Management Agency officials said Sunday they would initiate. Still, "we're all beholden to some of the same sources of replenishment," and D.C.-area health systems would have to work through their local and state health departments to access that federal asset, said Dr. Joseph Wright, interim president and CEO of University of Maryland Capital Region Health. "That's the job at hand for us."

And while suppliers are ramping up production — multinational conglomerate 3M Co. (NYSE: MMM) has committed to manufacturing 100 million N95 respirator masks a month — those allotments will likely go to areas of extreme outbreak first.

"Although we have cases in Northern Virginia, we don't have the same outbreak that's been seen in places like New York and California," DiLisi said. "Everything is getting rationed a little bit down the line, and we're getting in line with everybody else."

Low ER visitation could be calm before storm

That rationing is made a bit easier at the moment by low attendance at emergency departments. People are heeding warnings to stay in, and call their doctors if they are sick. UM Capital, part of the University of Maryland Medical System, is experiencing a roughly 30% decline in emergency department visits, with a slight skew toward patients with flu-like or acute respiratory illness, said Wright, also its senior vice president and chief medical officer.

Hospital officials across the region say they are seeing similar numbers, because the surge in coronavirus cases hasn't happened everywhere yet. But when it does, Wright expects it to put a major strain on the system's PPE.

"It feels like being on the shores of Phuket in 2004, like when the tide goes out, and you know the tsunami wave is coming — that's what it's sort of feeling like. We're in very, very heavy surge preparation here," Wright said, adding: "I can't overstate enough how concerned I am about the burn rate on our PPE, and we're being very, very stringent."

What people are doing to help

The region's health systems are getting help. UM Capital got word Tuesday from the University of Maryland, College Park, that some of its basic science labs plan to donate to UM Capital's hospitals, Wright said. And earlier this week, the Maryland system received a donation of homemade surgical masks from a local civic group.

Children's National has similarly gotten supplies from families, and is launching an initiative asking its donor base to sew cloth masks for administrators and other staff who don't work directly with patients, according to Gorman.

"I think the community is stepping up," Wright said. "They realize there may not be any cavalry coming from other sources."