

## Community Forum: Responding to COVID-19 in Northwest Wisconsin

### Transcript

Recorded November 5, 2020

Good afternoon everyone and thank you for joining us today at Mayo Clinic Health System in Northwest Wisconsin. My name is Kristin Everett. Speaking with you today will be Dr. Richard Helmers, regional vice president of Mayo Clinic Health System in Northwest Wisconsin; Jason Craig, regional chair of Administration for Mayo Clinic Health System in Northwest Wisconsin; and Pam White, chief nursing officer for Mayo Clinic Health System in Northwest Wisconsin.

We want to let you know that before we begin in accordance with Mayo Clinic Health System safety guidelines it's important to note everyone you see on your screen right now is alone in their own office allowing all of us to safely speak to you while not wearing a mask. Following comments from our leaders, they will be answering questions submitted prior to this event and we hope to get to as many of those as time allows so let's begin by hearing from Dr. Helmers on the current COVID-19 situation here in Northwest Wisconsin

Good afternoon everyone. I'm Dr. Rick Helmers. I'm a pulmonary doctor and I am the regional vice president for Mayo Clinic Health System here in Northwest Wisconsin. Thank you for joining us today. You are key partners in our Western Wisconsin region; leaders from schools law enforcement, local government, non-profit and service organizations, clergy and business. You all have a stake in the impacts of the pandemic on our communities. Protecting our patients health and safety is our highest priority in the Mayo Clinic Health System. Our commitment is to our patients, our staff and our communities and to be transparent and honest about the current COVID-19 situation in our communities. There's no other way to say it we absolutely need your help. We're facing a sobering reality here in Eau Claire and surrounding communities. Our COVID-19 community infection rates continue to increase rapidly. The number of people who have tested positive throughout northwest and west Wisconsin is staggering and we're seeing a surge of COVID positive patients in our hospitals and the situation is indeed serious. We're sharing this transparently because we need everyone's help to slow down the spread.

Thank you, Dr. Helmers. Next we'll hear from Jason Craig our regional chair of administration.

Good afternoon. I joined Dr. Helmers and Pam in welcoming all of you and thanking all of you for taking the time out of your busy calendars to join us here today. We also want to thank you ahead of time for your willingness to hear this information and hopefully share this information and influence the behaviors of others within our community. We're of course asking you to do that for the benefit of all in the community but in particular for the benefit of our staff who are struggling with COVID-19, currently both in their day-to-day care activities and capacities but also as this illness continues to affect them personally. The combination of COVID-19 admissions and the prevalence of positivity in our communities is causing a considerable strain on our ability and threatens our ability to continue to meet the care needs of our community. I have some data to share with you today that really crystallizes the challenge facing our community and is updated information from the numbers that we shared just about a week ago in our media event. If you recall about a week ago we shared with all of you that we had just about 200 staff absent due to COVID-19 related restrictions, either exposures or positivity. Unfortunately today I'm sharing with you that we are nearing the 300 count for staff being out of work due to positivity or exposure to COVID-19. For many of you joining us here today the number of staff we have out well exceeds the total number of all of your employees within your businesses. 300 is a very, very significant number for us and again approximates just about six to eight percent of our total staff.

Additionally we shared with you last week that our weekly testing positivity rates were between 22 to 25%. Unfortunately this week we're seeing that trend continue upwards and we are now in excess of 26% daily positivity rates. We've had multiple days this week when in excess of 300 individuals have tested positive for COVID and now our daily average is in excess of 200 individuals testing positive for COVID every day. We currently have approximately 70 individuals hospitalized in facilities throughout northwest Wisconsin and now unfortunately half of the inpatients hospitalized for COVID-19 in our ICU require ventilator support. Remember that whether on our unit or in our ICU a very large number of these COVID-19 patients require one-to-one care and are highly acute requiring more of our staff time so when you combine the absence rate of our staff in the increased acuity and critical nature of the patients within our facilities you can see how our ability to continue to deliver care is threatened. Fortunately due to the deferral of elective

work within our region we have been able to redeploy staff and maintain accessibility to our urgent and emergent services. So that's a point of emphasis here today. We remain available for your urgent and emergent care we continue to deliver those services every day and every hour of the day throughout our region. But we share these this data with you in an effort to better educate you as to the threat facing our ability to continue deliver care and again in the hopes that you'll take this information and influence others within the community to help our staff

Thank you, Jason. Up next we're going to hear from chief nursing officer Pam White.

Good afternoon. I'm Pam White. As Kristen has mentioned and I'm the chief nursing officer for our region. I can only echo what Dr. Helmers and Jason has already mentioned. As you can imagine this surge in COVID-19 cases in our region takes a huge physical and emotional toll on all of our staff. We really are human and we're really tired of this just like you are. If you don't serve in health care or have loved ones who do it might be hard to believe things are so dire but we're here to assure that that we are at a critical point in the Chippewa Valley. We're asking for your help and supporting our staff so that we can keep our capacity and ability to care for everyone in our community. We currently have a no visitor policy as I'm sure you're aware. That's in effect and we know how extremely hard that is for our patients and their loved ones as it's very hard on our staff as well I know that you understand that these decisions are not made lightly and they're done out of an abundance of caution to continue keeping our staff and patients as safe as possible. We are all tired our staff are working many extra hours and shifts in order to provide care for those in our community who need it most. We're here to serve that's what we're all about but we're also reaching our limitations. We only have so much staff. We're exploring all options right now. We've contacted retired staff. We're looking at students and how they can help. We're moving our staff from our ambulatory areas and we've called in nurses from Rochester and Arizona to help us. We've also brought in travelers. This is not something we do on a regular basis. Our managers including myself are putting on our scrubs and doing what we can do to help our staff and most importantly our patients. I know as you drive by our organization, it doesn't look different on the outside but i can guarantee you that the experience that we're feeling inside is much different all you have to do is walk down the halls of our critical care unit and you will see what the real situation is like in the Chippewa Valley. We recognize and share your feed with all that this pandemic has done to our personal and professional lives but staying safe and leading by example remains critically important. Thank you.

And thank you Pam. And again thank you Dr. Helmers and Jason. We know many people submitted questions for for you to answer we want to work through as many of those as possible during our time so the community can hear directly from you the current state of our situation the forecast for the future and also what they can do to help. I'm going to begin with by sending the first question to you, Dr. Helmers.

**When will a vaccine be available, and when would Mayo Clinic have it available?**

We anticipate having a vaccine in the first quarter of 2021. We're developing plans to quickly stand up vaccination clinics. There are a number of clinical trials underway that are showing promising results. This is due to the tremendous effort of scientists throughout the country, including Mayo Clinic, to develop and test the vaccine options. It's important to understand that vaccine developers are expected to meet very rigorous safety requirements, so the vaccine will be safe.

**I see that many high school and colleges approved winter sports. What is Mayo's stance on this?**

The key is proper mitigation efforts. If we cannot ensure proper mitigation steps within the various sports, we would not recommend that those sports continue. Our school districts have put in a tremendous amount of work and effort to maintain those mitigation efforts. We want to recognize the school districts for those efforts. There are a lot of winter sports that are very unique from fall sports, being that they cannot be conducted outdoors, which creates a different level of risk. In some instances, winter sports carry a higher likelihood of person-to-person contact and close proximity.

**If Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers mandates a safer-at-home order similar to the one issued in March, how will my business and health care be affected?**

The likelihood of that happening again is low. It's important that we all take individual ownership and spread our influence to follow the public health guidelines. Masking, physical distancing, hand-washing, getting the flu shot — we have to adhere to these recommended behaviors When the safer-at-home order was in place, we saw at much lower prevalence. We must count on ourselves and count on each other to be able to get some control over this virus spread.

**Can someone clarify what "deferred practice" means? Can I attend my scheduled clinic appointments for routine care?**

Even though we're deferring elective surgeries and procedures, we are open. We are not deferring all care. Emergency, urgent care, obstetrics care and care for people with underlying health conditions, including cancer, will continue. Registration staff is calling patients if appointments need to be rescheduled or if appointments will shift to virtual visits. Speak up if you believe your care needs are urgent and can't wait.

**Why aren't we hearing the same concerns from other health care organizations in our community? Are they in a surge capacity, as well?**

We're in close contact with other health care providers across Northwest Wisconsin. Many are seeing similar concerns as we are. It is an issue across the state of Wisconsin.

**COVID-19 is no worse than the seasonal flu. Why should I be concerned? Is misdiagnosis possible?**

COVID-19 is not just like influenza, and there are significant differences. During non-COVID times, we would be significantly concerned if we had five or six patients in our hospital with influenza. We have over 10 times more patients in our hospitals with COVID-19.

**Some seem to suggest doctors and hospitals are falsely reporting COVID-19 cases to make more money or make the pandemic appear more severe than it is. Is this true?**

According to Wisconsin statistics, approximately 5% of those testing positive for COVID-19 require hospitalization. That means 95% do not require hospitalization. If hospitals deliver unnecessary care, Medicare and payers will not pay for that care. So the narrative that there's a profit motive behind COVID-19 is flatly untrue. To think that we would defer elective work, which is a much higher volume, in order to care for a COVID-19 population does not make financial sense.

**Is it true that spikes in COVID-19 cases are because of increased testing?**

The rise in infections is not related to increased testing. The cause for concern is the increase in the percentage of positive results. We're seeing that positive result percentage continue to go up. This means that the virus is spreading quickly in our communities.

**Some suggest we can achieve herd immunity by letting the virus spread through the population. That way, we can get back to normal more quickly. Is that valid?**

The term herd immunity refers to when a large portion of a community becomes immune to an infection. The fewer people that can have the infection, the fewer people there are to pass it on. As a result, the whole community becomes protected — not just those who are immune. We think having the infection makes one immune, but that hasn't been proven yet. The problem with relying on community infection to create long-lasting herd immunity is that a large number of people have to become infected to reach the threshold for herd immunity. If that many people become ill with COVID-19 at once, the health care system would quickly become overwhelmed. This amount of infection can lead to serious complications and a large number of preventable deaths.

**Why should healthy people be concerned? It seems only the elderly or those with underlying health conditions will get very ill and require hospitalization for COVID-19.**

People of all ages can contract COVID-19. However, the risk of developing dangerous symptoms from COVID-19 is really increased in people who are older or people of any age who have other serious health problems, such as heart or lung conditions, weakened immune systems, severe obesity or diabetes. People from all age groups are being hospitalized with COVID-19. The ages of the hospitalized individuals fluctuate day to day as people are discharged and new people are admitted. We have seen severely ill individuals in their 20s, 30s, 40s — all ages across the spectrum.

Thank you very much and thanks to Pam and Jason and Dr. Helmers. I know we're starting to near the end of our time together and I wonder if you have any closing comments you'd like to share with our guests. Thank you everyone for your support and for your questions we are also fortunate to provide care here in western Wisconsin. We know each of you is feeling the pressure too we're all in this together we are grateful to all of you for doing your part and each day that passes brings us one day closer to the end of this. Thank you again for helping to lead by example in the community and encourage everyone in your network to do the same and I agree thank you to all of you for your participation and support. Our nurses and staff on the front lines are dedicated and working so hard and they need your help and empathy please lead by example in the community and encourage those in your families, workplaces and social circles to do the same. Please be vigilant with wearing your mask, avoiding medium and large gatherings, washing your hands, and keeping space between you and others.

We know that works. Help us so that we can have our full capacity to help you. I also want to extend my thanks to all of you for joining us here today again. It's humbling to have so many interested in what's going on and so many supporters of what it is that we do every day. In the past comments, I referenced the compassion and the care of this community and we could not be prouder to be a part of this community and could not be prouder to serve this community. We referenced that back in the spring so many of you and your businesses were so generous to us, providing our staff with meals, putting together civic groups to create masks and supporting us in so many different ways. What we need now more than ever from this community is the support for our staff and our patients by following those public health guidelines that Pam just referenced. We need your help in a different way but in just as meaningful a way and again we could not be prouder of this community and we can't thank all of you enough for your time, for your willingness to help and your willingness to influence others.

Thank you to our leadership team and to all of you again for joining us today we truly appreciate your interest your partnership and all of your efforts in helping slow the spread of COVID-19 in our community so thank you all. Be well and stay safe.