

suburban life

Abington – Jefferson Health, which recently opened a new outpatient campus in Horsham, continues to go above and beyond to ensure patient safety in the time of COVID-19.

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Confident in Care

Abington – Jefferson Health continues to go above and beyond to ensure patient safety in the time of COVID-19.

by JENNY GRAHAM



As chair of the family medicine department of Abington – Jefferson Health, John J. Russell, M.D., acknowledges the “challenges” associated with keeping people safe in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic. After all, Abington – Jefferson Health serves approximately 110,000 patients per year in its Emergency Departments (at Abington Hospital and Abington – Lansdale Hospital) and admitted more than 35,000 inpatients in fiscal year 2020. A large network of physicians in more than 70 locations serves residents of Bucks, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties.

Dr. Russell understands the depth of the challenge more than most; he was among the first doctors to work at Abington – Jefferson’s COVID-19 testing center, which has since completed “thousands and thousands” of tests. He can say he has been heartened by his organization’s efforts to help keep the community safe. At the same time, he knows some people may be choosing to delay care until the proverbial dust settles.

“People should feel safe to return,” adds Dr. Russell, who also is the director of the Abington – Jefferson Health family medicine residency program. “We have rigorous protocols in place to make sure things are safe, and that’s in the hospital and all ambulatory practices such as OB/GYN, orthopedic, neurology, and others. We’re adhering to all CDC guidelines, using social distancing, wearing masks, and wiping down all equipment with a solution that kills the virus.”

Abington – Jefferson Health offers more than 70 physician practice locations throughout the suburbs, some located at one of seven outpatient campuses. These centers, many of which offer lab services, radiology testing, and other services, are located in Blue Bell, Lower Gwynedd, Montgomeryville, Elkins Park, Warminster, and Willow Grove. A campus in Horsham was recently opened.



Abington – Jefferson Health has adopted rigorous safety protocols to protect patients and staff in all of its locations.

“We solved problems,” he continues. “We had residents in the ICU, in the hospital, taking care of sick folks, but very few employees have gotten sick. We’ve had enough PPE, and it has really worked. I’m very proud to be part of Abington – Jefferson. I’m more frightened about catching the virus in a retail facility than at work.”

Abington – Jefferson Health has steadily evolved its safety protocols since the outbreak began earlier this year. Staving off the virus has been no small feat, yet it has not fought this battle alone. Jefferson Health has mounted a coordinated response across its network of 14 hospitals and more than 40 outpatient and urgent care centers throughout Philadelphia, Bucks, and Montgomery counties in Pennsylvania, as well as in Camden and Gloucester counties across the river in New Jersey.

“When this all started, we didn’t know much about the virus or what was working,” shares Keith W. Sweigard, M.D., associate chief medical officer and senior vice president for Jefferson Medical Group. “Initially, we thought it was spread just through droplets. We are learning that it can be an aerosol, and we have learned that asymptomatic patients can infect people before they are symptomatic.”

As a first line of defense, Jefferson Health initiated daily communication among the leadership teams of all facilities. These lines of communication helped Abington – Jefferson come up with a multipronged plan to help patients stay safe, particularly at Abington Hospital and Abington – Lansdale Hospital.

Protocols such as face shields for staff and screening patients on multiple levels have helped to reduce COVID-19 saturation at the hospital. Community measures such as facemask compliance and social distancing have played a significant role, too. Dr. Sweigard

suggests that while these efforts to protect patients and staff have been “working well,” the health system continues to learn and evolve as new information and more granular data emerge.

Other safeguards have included limiting patient-to-patient interactions in all Abington – Jefferson Health facilities. To begin with, doctors have decreased the number of patients seen each hour. In addition, patients do not linger in the waiting room; rather, they proceed from the front door to the exam room, and many appointments that were once done face to face have been migrated to telehealth.

Telehealth is nothing new to Abington – Jefferson Health—the JeffConnect telehealth system has been in use for several years—but its use has boomed of late; doctors conducted as many as 1,000 telehealth visits per day in the first two weeks of the pandemic, according to Dr. Sweigard. Looking ahead, he foresees roughly 20 percent of the work of primary care physicians being done via telehealth.

“I certainly don’t think telehealth will replace in-person visits, but if someone is still not comfortable coming into the office, we invite them to call their doctor to ask about telehealth,” Dr. Russell adds. “With an iPhone or computer, you can see your doctor and your doctor can see you, and can certainly review any labs needed, preventive health tests [such as colonoscopies and mammograms], and even conduct an annual wellness

visit—a free service to Medicare recipients, thanks to the Affordable Care Act.”

What Lies Ahead

As summer draws to a close, Dr. Russell suggests people should start thinking about getting an influenza shot for the upcoming season, which tends to peak in February. Likewise, he recommends a pneumococcal vaccine for everyone over the age of 65, as well as people under age 65 with certain medical conditions and those who smoke cigarettes.

“Everyone is talking about a COVID virus vaccine, but in truth, only about 50 percent of people get flu shots,” he says. “We’re working on setting up drive-through flu vaccination this year.”

Even with the uncertainty surrounding COVID-19, Drs. Russell and Sweigard want the public to have confidence as they seek out health care at Abington – Jefferson. Dr. Sweigard says the programs and protocols put in place “have been effective in keeping people safe.”

“Very few staff have contracted the virus through a work environment, and the PPE implemented have been very effective,” he adds. “Our screening process is very clear. It starts over the phone, then continues at the door and in the office. We are always looking to manage the level of visitation that can solve a patient’s issue with the most safety.” ■



FOR MORE INFORMATION ON ABINGTON – JEFFERSON HEALTH,

including the latest on safety protocols, COVID-19, and more, visit JeffersonHealth.org/Abington.