

By Sarah Cavacini on Friday, October 23, 2020

The coronavirus pandemic began seven months ago and Putnam Community Medical Center did not escape virus ramifications.

Putnam Community CEO Mark Dooley said in his almost 30 years in health care he has never seen anything like COVID-19. He handled other viruses such as flu, but this outbreak caused a set of issues hospitals had never seen. Economy and hospital lockdowns, community mask recommendations and people being afraid to visit hospitals were instances new to him.

“The hardest thing has been the uncertainty,” he said. “And that’s probably the biggest burden on our staff, as well.”

He said Putnam Community hit its peak in late July when 26 inpatients tested positive for COVID-19.

It took up to five minutes for nurses to put on protective gear and another five minutes to take it off while dealing with six patients who were checked on hourly for 12-hour shifts.

The hospital staff go through up to 300 surgical masks per day and up to 50 N-95 masks per day, but Dooley said Putnam Community has an ample supply of personal protective equipment.

The high volume of patients meant elective surgeries had to be temporarily suspended again after being allowed in May to have more staff available, according to Dooley.

The high numbers slowed in August and Thursday, Putnam Community had only one positive patient, he said.

Although the numbers are lower, House Supervisor Charli McCollough said being a nurse through the pandemic has not been easy with frequent guideline changes and hospital instructions.

“If it was only treating the patients who were sick, it would be simple. We would figure that out,” McCollough said. “But you have to figure out the hysteria, too, which has been really hard.”

Visitors were not allowed to see patients for a few months during the pandemic and, even now, only one family member can visit at a time. With family and friends being allowed again, McCollough said the visits help patients.

“When you’re sick, you want your family close by and there was a point where the state mandates we couldn’t let anyone in but the patient,” she said. “I think that’s a huge factor in getting better. If you’re alone, it’s hard.”

As of Wednesday, Putnam Community treated 209 positive patients and tested 1,949, according to Dooley. A specific hospital ward was designated for coronavirus patients and the CEO said less than 5% of hospital employees tested positive for the virus in the seven-month period.

He said about 10 patients at the hospital died of coronavirus complications, or 4.78%. The highest number of patients on ventilators at one time was 11 and the one patient Thursday was not on a ventilator or in the intensive care unit.

Putnam County health officials reported 27 new cases Thursday and the total number of cases countywide since the outbreak began reached 2,323. According to the Florida Department of Health, 50 deaths have been reported in the county.

Dooley saw people of all ages come into the hospital because of COVID-19 complications and the youngest person he saw on a ventilator was 40 years old.

Although positive coronavirus cases continue, the CEO said hospitalizations are not increasing at the same rate.

But this does not mean residents are out of the woods yet.

Flu season began Oct. 1 and could cause a slight comeback in coronavirus cases, Dooley said. Precautions to take are similar to COVID-19 such as handwashing and limiting contact with people if sick, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website.

However, unlike coronavirus, flu vaccines are available and encouraged by the CDC.

“I do think there’s probably a decent chance that we’ll see a resurgence of a combination of COVID and flu,” Dooley said. “... We’ve been very careful not to fully go away from some of the protocols we’ve implemented.”

Such protocols include keeping vending machines closed to visitors and having socially-distanced waiting room seats.

Dooley said he hopes things can get back to life before COVID-19 but still recommended people wear a mask when around many people.

“I know it’s an inconvenience and ... it’s (people’s) right to choose whether they wear a mask or not but, when you’re in a crowded area, to me it just makes a lot of sense to protect yourself anyway you can,” Dooley said. “... I don’t go anywhere in public, in grocery stores, in restaurants without wearing my mask.”

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