Stories From COVID-19 Frontlines: Nursing Shines at Critical Moments

By Michael Dandorph, CEO of Wellforce

Nursing teams are a critical part of a healthy and high-functioning health care system. From nurses in the hospital and ambulatory clinics to those caring for patients in their homes, these health care professionals are steadfast in providing patients with clinical excellence and the compassionate health care that they deserve.

When the highly infectious COVID-19 pandemic challenged us all, nurses across the Wellforce system stepped up for their patients and communities — displaying courage, skill, leadership, and creativity to address this public health crisis. For some, that meant building on years of training and expertise to design new care models for the sickest of patients. For others, it meant shifting roles to provide unparalleled, high-quality patient care in new and different parts of our hospitals. For the entire Wellforce family, it has meant using ingenuity, instincts and skills to develop innovative ways to meet COVID-19 head on and keep patients and their families at the center of everything we do.

When patients need them, our amazing nurses step forward.

For instance, Joanne Dusablon, RN, clinical manager at the Surgery Center at Lowell General Chelmsford, typically works with teams of nurses to help patients prepare for elective procedures. When those operations were postponed in March, Joanne accepted a new challenge: help develop and run a drive-through COVID-19 testing clinic. Joanne is overseeing a team of colleagues from all over the hospital who have rallied together. Joanne knows the wellbeing of her team is important in stressful times, so they practice deep, calming breaths each shift and get energized with daily dancing sessions.

“I’m constantly thinking about my staff and how they had to step out of their comfort zone when we stopped elective surgeries and then suddenly they are out here in a drive-through clinic,” Joanne said. “I’m there with them. I tell them ‘We’re all in this together’ and I’m so proud of them.”

Our nurses also have created innovations to ensure better, safer and more compassionate care in these stressful and difficult times. Nurses know that great care requires excellent communication, so they creatively developed methods to expertly monitor patients, even when they cannot be in the room. At Tufts Medical Center, nursing brainstorms led to the idea of using baby monitors and binoculars to see and hear everything in the patients’ rooms while conserving personal protective equipment (PPE.) Other nurses have redesigned ICU environments to ensure everyone has what they need when they need it to reliably and safely put on and take off PPE. Together they conducted simulations, perfecting rapid entrance and safe exits from the room.

Tufts Medical Center operating room nurses Ann Marie Melanson, RN, and Michael Signori, RN, stepped out of the comfort of their normal routines in the OR and entered the first COVID ICU. Their experience and expertise in using PPE in the OR was invaluable and they became trusted resources to help the team work safely.

“Our nurses and doctors are entering an infectious environment; it is my job to ensure they are safe,” Ann Marie said. “I am in awe of how expertly our ICU nurses care for patients, the compassion they have for families and each other. I would do anything to help them keep safe. It’s an honor to be a member of this amazing team.”

Nurses at MelroseWakefield Hospital realized that extending IV tubing allows them to keep IV pumps outside of patient rooms. By doing so, patient care is uninterrupted and staff and patients remain safe while preserving PPE. Meanwhile, nurse anesthetist Kristen Belmonte, RN, worked with Dr. Monica Shook to create two types of intubation boxes, which are structures designed to create a barrier between a patient and the provider who is inserting a breathing tube to limit the exposure of potential droplets during the process. For Director of Peri-operative Services Kris Flynn, RN, the focus has been surge preparedness, critical droplets to the ICUs and emergency department.

“There are so many examples of how my colleagues at MelroseWakefield Healthcare have used their experience and skills to meet the challenges we have been facing,” Kris said. “At the end of the day, we all got into health care to help people. Everyone is doing their part.”

Prior to COVID-19, nurses often interacted with patients' family members and friends as they play a critical role in the healing process. But with visitor restrictions in place, our nurses had to find new ways to involve the patients’ loved ones and to bring positivity and light where they could. Jeanna Barbieri, RN, a Lowell General Hospital emergency room nurse, put out the call to patients’ family members to send pictures that she would print out and put on display in patients’ rooms. This has been a comfort to many patients and worried families.

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"Families tell us that telemedicine gives them relief and peace of mind," said Gina Serino, RN, a clinical manager with Home Health Foundation. "It requires a bit of a learning curve, so I applaud every one of our health care professionals who has learned this new technique to monitor patients and manage their symptoms."

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