March 20, 2020

Public, patient safety top priorities at Lake Health District

LAKEVIEW — When novel coronavirus arrived in Oregon, Lake Health District’s Emergency Preparedness Team was ready. They still are.

Following national standards, the team recently completed a two week-long drill simulating an infection disease pandemic. They learned a lot in that process and that practice in a “what if” scenario is now proving invaluable to the Lake District Hospital staff as coronavirus spreads.

With the virus being so new and with so little known about it, information is changing daily. This is part of the challenge in keeping up with best practices for care and medical staff and the public informed about when to act, how to act, and what is needed to slow the virus’ spread in our community.

Inside the Incident Command Center at Lake District Hospital, white boards are covered with hand drawn graphs and notes outlining information to be shared or acted on, and listing team members’ responsibilities, everyone working together to get the most effective and efficient processes in place for keeping patients and staff safe during the coming months. Long hours are being devoted to this goal.

TIMELINE

March 13. Day #1: People test positive for COVID-19 in Klamath and Deschutes counties. One confirmed case indicates other cases are present but hidden because of limited testing availability and people experiencing milder symptoms. To ensure healthcare providers can respond quickly and efficiently to potential COVID-19 cases, Lake Health District Incident Command implements pre-established protocols.

Medical staff start meeting several times a day to review the patients currently in the hospital. The decision is made to keep as many beds open while balancing best care recommendations for patients already admitted to the hospital. The team creates a separate isolation section with seven beds, an emergency exam room, a dedicated nurse and separate ventilation equipment and supplies such as linens.

March 14. Day #2: As a precaution, Lake District Hospital admits its first suspected case of COVID-19 to the isolation unit. Since testing occurs in a state laboratory and turnaround time is an unknown variable, action is taken in an abundance of caution, without confirmation of the virus being present Test results were unavailable at the time of this writing.

March 15. Day #3: The Emergency Preparedness Team determines that every person entering Lake District Hospital and the clinics must be pre-screened. Department heads inform all Lake Health District staff that no visitors, including family and friends, are allowed in the building.
With the goal of separating sick people from healthy people, the hospital stops all non-essential public visits. All requests for medical records, discussions with billing or physical therapy, and business-related interactions should take place on the phone, by email, or through the patient portal system. The Emergency Preparedness Team emphasizes that these policies are in place to protect lives, not to make life inconvenient. Changing small habits and routines could save the lives of family members, friends and neighbors.

March 16. Day #4: Visitor and patient pre-screening officially goes into effect. Traffic cones and barriers are set up and at the hospital’s request local Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service Employees step in to help direct patients and visitors to designated entry points on the Lake Health District campus. Everyone approaching the facility is directed to remain in their vehicle while clinical staff check their temperature, oxygen level, and pulse and screens them with a question-and-answer process.

Based on the results of the initial screening, staff direct people to return home to self-isolate or send them to a check station in the Emergency Department parking lot, where a nurse and scribe call a physician to decide the next steps to be taken. Everyone who is cleared to enter the building receives a sticker indicating they have passed the screening. Sticker styles change daily to ensure everyone entering the hospital has been screened that day. Greeters meeting those cleared to enter provide an additional layer of protection by double checking those who are entering and directing them to the appropriate location.

Since then and where we are now: Currently, Lake Health District staff members are following up with the people who have been sent home. If there are additional concerns about symptoms, a primary care provider will follow up as well.

While some people have been irritated by the new measures, Lake Health District’s Emergency Preparedness Team reminds the community that precaution is necessary against this new virus. Older adults and people with underlying chronic medical conditions, such as heart and lung disease and diabetes, are most at risk for developing serious cases of COVID-19. People of all ages can get and do sick, however, and everyone can spread coronavirus even if they don’t show symptoms.

Screenings, hand washing, and following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines will slow the spread of coronavirus. For more information on what you can do to keep yourself, your family, your friends, and your community safe, visit https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html. Information about Lake County COVID-19 prevention efforts is available on the Health District’s website, www.lakehealthdistrict.org, and Facebook page, facebook.com/LakeDistrictHospitalOregon.