Op-ed: Sky Lakes CEO calls for shelter-in-place

By PAUL STEWART Sky Lakes Medical Center President and CEO
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Paul Stewart, CEO and President of Sky Lakes Medical Center.
H&N photo by Kurt Liedtke
I'll admit that a month or so ago, I thought COVID-19 (coronavirus) might be another overblown SARS or H1N1 kind of flu. As I studied more about it, however, that sentiment changed and Sky Lakes began immediately taking steps to address what we perceived could be a significant threat to our community.

We have triggered our internal disaster planning and Emergency Response Plan, including an Incident Command System. Teams of clinicians, leaders and staff are meeting regularly to evaluate policies and protocols, respond to current data and best practices, develop contingency plans, and allocate scarce resources. You can find more about the changes we are implementing to address this virus on our website, SkyLakes.org.

On Wednesday, I along with a few of my Oregon peers took part in a conference call with representatives of Washington state hospitals. As you know, Washington is ahead of most of the country in the number of documented cases and in dealing with infected individuals. They shared with us their current experience. They were giving us the warning today that they wish they had two to three weeks ago. Their take away – which I am grateful they shared with us – was that they moved too slowly.

I can only characterize what I heard as terrifying – inadequate hospital capacity to handle the burden, high death rate, even talk about having to ration care.

Projections are that Washington has not peaked and will not for about another two weeks. Projections are that Oregon is four weeks behind them with our peak by some projections being the end of April.

In the worst-case projections, Oregon will only have about half of the hospital capacity that may be needed. This strain of coronavirus is more contagious than the flu, capable of killing 10 times as many people as the flu. To borrow a phrase from our colleagues in Italy: We are at war. At war with a novel virus – an enemy – that we cannot yet see and do not know when it is coming. Our only hope at coming out on the winning side of this battle is to act quickly and act boldly to bend this curve down.

For weeks, we saw evidence of community spread, but testing criteria was still directed only at high-risk travelers. Even now, many states still have little to no testing available.
Why does this matter? It matters because we missed many early cases. It matters because we are still missing them. It matters because those cases spread to others, which spread to others, and so on. Many people have virtually no symptoms and can spread it without knowing they are doing so.

Its infection rate is exponential. That means, if the virus jumps to a new person every two to five days, as scientists calculate, then a single infected person could lead to more than 4,100 total infections in a month – assuming nothing is done to interrupt the infection chains.

This leads us to social distancing and self-quarantining. Why is this so important? Because any of us could have it. Until we can test everyone, widely, we cannot know. As it stands right now, you may not be able to get tested, as our resources are so very limited – we started weeks ago requesting the resources to test and protect, but supplies have been slow in coming. We therefore have had to restrict testing to those people meeting very strict CDC criteria.

Therefore, the only way to curb the spread is to assume you may have it, and do your utmost best to limit your exposure to anyone else.

On Wednesday the 62 hospitals in Oregon asked the Governor to take the step of ordering “sheltering in place” for the state.

Is this practical? No. Is it fair? No. But I believe it is the right thing to do. Please take this situation seriously.

**So what can we do?**

First: Stay home. Stay away from other people. Cancel your plans. Cancel your travel.

Second: Wash your hands and don’t touch your face.

Third: Do not visit anyone in the hospital or nursing home. Do not go to the Emergency Department unless your condition is potentially life-threatening. If you do not feel well, call your healthcare provider.
Fourth: Save the protective masks for healthcare workers, those who are going to need them to ensure the front-line caregivers don’t get the infection, so they can continue caring for patients.

Maybe most importantly: If you have a fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue, shortness of breath, muscle aches, vomiting and diarrhea you need to self-isolate and contact your healthcare provider; get tested if it’s available, and if not, stay home and self-quarantine for 14 days, or until you no longer have symptoms for 72 hours.

When all is said and done, the chances are high that you’ll be completely fine. Scientists tell us 80% of people will have few to no symptoms.

Take steps now to protect the other 20%, those who may be compromised and have to be admitted to the hospital, or worse, in a coma on a ventilator machine, or one of the 1% who dies.

We’re all in this together, and we all need to do our part to help each other, for all of us.

We are here for you and stand prepared to take care of you. The physicians, nurses and staff of Sky Lakes Medical Center are brave, committed individuals – we are doing and will continue to do all we can to keep you safe and well.