



Dr. Alexia Harrist

Fighting a Pandemic

State health officer looks back at changes since March 1

BY ILENE OLSON



A delineation mark across the middle of March 2020 separates the life we all knew before COVID-19, and the life we're still adjusting to now. That was when nearly every aspect of every person's life changed.

That holds especially true for Wyoming State Health Officer and State Epidemiologist Alexia Harrist, MD, PhD, who was catapulted into the throes of a pandemic, transforming her usually behind-the-scenes role into a very public one that she was entirely unaccustomed to.

"It was not something I had ever looked toward being," Dr. Harrist said.

At that time, no one really knew much about this new coronavirus or the disease it causes—only that it was increasingly obvious that it was dangerous and, for far too many, life-threatening.

"It certainly was a steep learning curve," Dr. Harrist said. "It was, and it is still, a new virus that has caused a lot of morbidity and mortality. We didn't have a vaccine. We didn't have a treatment. We certainly understood from other types

of viruses how it was spread, but we didn't know what we needed to know.

"We always like to make decisions after having all the data and being able to analyze and interpret all of the data. In a pandemic, that's just not possible."

The only choices available in March were to offer prophylactic treatments to patients and to close places where there was a high risk of public transmission of the virus.

"I think we all had very serious discussions about when the appropriate time to take those measures would be, but it became more clear when it was a national strategy ... to close those very high-risk public places."

Even with federal guidance, those decisions were agonizing, she said.

"We know that those types of closures and restrictions have very real effects on people," Dr. Harrist said. "Our goal the entire time was to make sure we were doing the absolute minimum we needed to do to protect the public."

It took time to devise and implement plans that would

allow public life to resume to the degree that was possible, while continuing to protect the health of the public.

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“Now, we are learning more about how to protect people from transmission, and we prefer to take those steps instead of closing things down. Those, of course, are what we have been talking about for a while now: physical distancing from others, staying home when you’re sick, wearing masks, and handwashing.”

There will be more ways to fight COVID-19. Vaccines are being developed and tested now, and Dr. Harrist was a member of the working group that developed a state vaccination draft plan. She reviewed the draft in October before it was submitted to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for approval. The draft document will change as more information about vaccines becomes available, she said. More data about the antiviral drug Remdesivir is already available. Remdesivir is being distributed around the state, and protocols for its use are more widely understood.

Day by day

Dr. Harrist is almost always focused on what must be done. She seldom speaks about her own efforts or feelings, preferring instead to highlight the hard work that her team puts in. The staff in her division of the Wyoming Department of Health—public health, laboratory and epidemiology—consists of excellent, dedicated healthcare professionals,

she said. But they are small in number, and they have had to put many of their regular duties aside for now to focus fully on needs created by the pandemic.

“They have just done a fantastic job of taking on the job and learning, even on evenings and weekends. I could not be more proud of what they have done.”

Dr. Harrist and her staff are managing data systems and providing information to medical professionals and to the public, overseeing COVID-19 testing, and manufacturing and shipping media for samples, among other duties.

Perhaps the only good thing to come out of this pandemic is increased communication with county health officers in the state.

“It’s been incredibly helpful for me to hear from them, and for other county health officers to hear what’s happening in other counties,” Dr. Harrist said.

As the pandemic stretches on, so does the exhaustion felt by doctors, nurses, lab workers and other healthcare professionals.

“Everyone is tired. It really feels like a straight seven months of dealing with emergencies,” Dr. Harrist said.

In late October, as COVID-19 cases surged, the Casper Star Tribune reported that Cheyenne Regional Medical Center was caring for 29 COVID patients. Dr. Harrist worked with Laramie County Health Officer Stan Hartman, MD, to review an exception request from the Cheyenne-Laramie County Health Department to institute a mask mandate in that county.

She did the same with Teton County Health Officer Travis Riddell, MD, in July. A mask mandate went into effect on July 21 in Teton County, and has been extended several times





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since. Most county exception requests she received prior to that aimed at relaxing some of the state health requirements related to COVID-19 precautions.

Prevention is the key

Primary concerns about COVID-19 remain the same as they were in March.

“Our biggest concern is healthcare capacity,” Dr. Harrist said. “We’re a small state. We don’t have a lot of ICU beds or ventilators. We have a limited number of healthcare workers, and they may become infected themselves.”

If healthcare capacity is overwhelmed, patients with COVID-19 or other life-threatening ailments may not be able to get the care they need, she said.


Late in October, Dr. Harrist met in Riverton with Deborah Birx, MD, the White House coronavirus response coordinator. With community spread surging in Wyoming,

their discussion centered largely on strategies for preventing and testing for COVID-19.

“It is a critical time for Wyoming,” Dr. Harrist said.

Each time she speaks during Gov. Mark Gordon’s weekly press conferences, Dr. Harrist stresses preventive measures. Prevention is vital to ensure critical functions in society continue, vulnerable people in the community stay safe, and schools and businesses stay open, she said.

“We’re at a point where we’re all tired of the pandemic. We want to get back to life as normal. But we have to continue to do these things that are not particularly fun, without a clear end in sight,” she said.

“If Wyoming residents want to see improvements, they need to take our recommendations seriously and act upon them. At the same time, while we are concerned, we do believe Wyoming is in a better place for responding now than we were several months ago.” 



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