



Science and Sacrifice

County health officers serve with selflessness

BY ILENE OLSON

Early in the days of the COVID-19 shutdown, a committee was formed for the sole purpose of having Marion Smith, MD, of Torrington fired from her position as Goshen County health officer. The committee didn't like Dr. Smith telling them to take precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

"Little did they know how much I wanted to throw up my hands and run!" Dr. Smith said. "Nobody in their right mind would want that job right now."

The committee was unsuccessful. Now Dr. Smith is exhausted, along with the 22 other county health officers around the state. They all have been tired and stressed for months.

Each county health officer is a doctor who has contracted with the Wyoming Department of Health and their county to perform public health duties in addition to their medical practice.

Their roles as county health officers jumped from the backseat of their professional lives into the driver's seat on March 13. That was when public places closed down in the United States, including Wyoming, as the incidence and threat of COVID-19 began to spread across the country.

Big changes

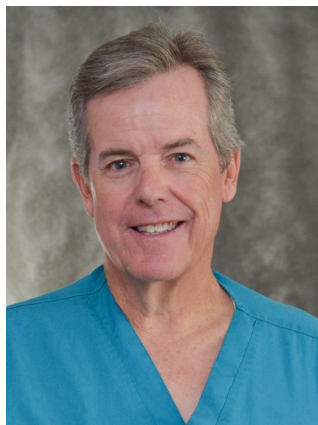
"COVID-19 has changed everything," said Teton County Public Health Officer Travis Riddell, MD, of Jackson. In addition to his work as a pediatrician, he now serves as a voice for public health officials and interacts with the media. "Those things have changed my day-to-day work in a big way."

Brian Gee, MD, of Lander was serving as Fremont County health officer when that county became Wyoming's epicenter for the COVID-19 pandemic early on.

"As our hospitals worked hard to support critically ill

patients, Dr. Bill Calder and I worked with other members of the emergency management team to explore alternative care venues ... for acute and convalescent care of COVID patients.

"Testing was mostly nonexistent initially," he said. "We set up a system to monitor patients with COVID-like symptoms to try and mitigate the spread. With the help of the emergency management team and all of the clinics in the county, we were able to set up a system that helped us immensely in the process."



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DR. AARON BILLIN

As testing became available on a limited basis, Wind River Cares and the Indian Health Service partnered to test as many people as possible. Later, the state was able to ramp up testing capacity, and testing and contact tracing became easier.

One of his biggest challenges was communicating about COVID-19 issues and precautions with local governments and residents in a large, diverse county, Dr. Gee said.

Park County Health Officer Aaron Billin, MD, of Powell, said his public health responsibilities now take up 20-60 hours per week, on top of a full-time job as medical director of a local emergency department.

"Because many responsibilities can only be done during the day, many of my updates for the county are done after midnight," he said.

Mask mandates

A big challenge for public health officers is dealing with the politicization of wearing face masks to curb the spread of COVID-19.

In August, the Goshen County Commission passed a resolution saying that adults in the county were reasonable and should be allowed to make their own decisions; they were not bound by state health orders.

Dr. Smith, who is also a family practice physician in Torrington, said, “That was embarrassing. The county attorney [who drafted the resolution] called to warn me: ‘I just wanted to let you know that it has absolutely no legal bearing.’ But I think a lot of people up here took it as gospel.”

Despite that resistance, “I’m going to do what I think is the right thing, and that’s all I can do,” Dr. Smith said. “If somebody is mad at me, so be it. I’d hate to think that, through our neglect, people are going to die.”

Dr. Riddell had better luck in Teton County. After cases there surged in June and July, he requested and received a county-wide mask mandate from Wyoming State Health Officer and State Epidemiologist Alexia Harrist, MD, PhD.

The public has been largely cooperative, and cases fell dramatically after the mask mandate went into effect on July 21. “There’s just so much evidence for the efficacy of masks. To stop [COVID-19] spreading, masks are the best technology we have,” Dr. Riddell said.

Local governments in Laramie County have been mostly cooperative, said Laramie County Health Officer Stan Hartman, MD, of Cheyenne. Compliance has improved in a lot of the stores, as well.

Following a surge of COVID-19 cases in Laramie County in September and October, Dr. Hartman requested and received a mask mandate. The Laramie County mask mandate went into

effect on Nov. 2.

Uinta County Health Officer Michael Adams, MD, of Evanston, said things went well there until Memorial Day weekend.

“We started with very few cases ... until a superspreader event at a local bar on May 30 caused a huge outbreak,” he said.

That outbreak put Uinta County at the top of all counties in the state for active cases in June and into July.

Dr. Adams himself contracted COVID-19 shortly after contributing to this story.

On Oct. 29, he wrote in an email, “I find it ironic that we carefully observe precautions of distance and masking and screening in my office, and I am the biggest promoter for these precautions in the county, yet I got it anyway and have shared it with close family. I have no clue who may have shared it with me, but most likely an asymptomatic carrier. ... I am improving and off of isolation, but the general symptoms of fatigue and cough and malaise persist.”

Dr. Adams added, “We currently have drafted a letter from all county health officers and the Wyoming Medical Society board of trustees to Governor Gordon, requesting a statewide mask mandate due to the dire straits we are now in as a state.”

Not fighting alone

County health officers stressed how important public health nurses have been in helping to control the COVID-19 pandemic in Wyoming.

“They are the backbone of our efforts as well as the reason for most of our success in achieving control,” Dr. Adams said.

“We had nurses that worked long into the night and over weekends,” Dr. Riddell said. They are the ones doing the contract tracing, working with schools, restaurants and businesses, trying to keep transmission down.”

“They have been absolutely indispensable,” agreed Dr.



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DR. MICHAEL ADAMS



Public Health

Hartman. “They have been doing extensive contact tracing, drive-up COVID-19 testing, and putting in 12-hour days to accomplish this.”

County health officers’ success stories focus largely on keeping schools open.

“The school districts have been dedicated to masking, distancing, screening and sanitation,” Dr. Adams said. “They set the example for the rest of us.” He also praised leadership at the Wyoming State Hospital, which managed the few cases there and prevented “what could be a giant problem in a difficult mental health hospital population.”

Dr. Billin said working with Yellowstone National Park to keep cases among tourists to a minimum was a success as well. Dr. Smith said her success comes from patient and community gratitude. The people who encourage her and thank her for doing her difficult job make the stress and hardships worth the effort. “I guess that’s why I keep going,” she said.

A future with COVID

County public health officers’ concerns have remained the same since the beginning of the pandemic.

They worry that, as pandemic fatigue sets in, people will become complacent and bigger surges in COVID-19 cases will occur. They worry that the number of COVID-19 patients could outstrip the number of hospital beds, ICU capacity, ventilators and medical personnel available.

“The idea that we could get to a point where we didn’t have enough doctors to care for COVID-19, not to mention others with broken bones and other health problems—that’s what I wake up every morning thinking we need to avoid,” Dr. Riddell said.

In his report to the public on Facebook on Oct. 26, Dr. Billin wrote: “It is one thing to have increased active cases in Park County, but now our hospitals are filling up. ...

“If you haven’t taken—(1) mask wearing, (2) social distancing, (3) staying home when you are sick, and (4) cooperating with contact tracing—seriously before now, this is the time to do so.”

Dr. Hartman said people’s misconception that only the old and the sick are affected by COVID-19 also concerns him.

That’s not true at all,” he said. “There’s a lot of morbidity

that doesn’t show up in the death numbers. There is very little attention being paid to things that happen, even if they don’t get seriously ill.”

One of those is multi-system inflammatory syndrome, which has occurred in children all over the country. It is devastating and sometimes fatal, though still quite rare.

The median age for multi-system inflammatory syndrome is 8.3, but Hartman said something similar is beginning to affect older children and adults as well.

Other problems patients often experience after having COVID-19 include ongoing fatigue and difficulty concentrating, Dr. Hartman said.

Now, eight months after the shutdown in March, everyone is feeling the fatigue caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Doctors and medical personnel are working very long hours. The public is chafing at restrictions.

“Everyone is very much sick of this at this point, but I would say no one more so than the folks on the front lines,” Dr. Riddell said. “It changes every moment of every day.”

As the weeks have grown into months, despair has set in for many of those who are isolated and lonely.



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DR. TRAVIS RIDDELL

“In our nursing home, there have been people who have died—my mother in law, for one—who I think died of a broken heart,” said Dr. Smith. “They couldn’t have visitors; they couldn’t be touched. But it’s the way it is, and we have to get through it. And we will.”

County health officers say it is more important now than ever to do everything possible to avoid transmission of COVID-19.

“Every single person has a role in this,” Dr. Riddell said. “Our actions affect others, and we as a whole need to keep our community safe.”

We're stretching and stretching

In a Nov. 5 press conference, James J. Bleicher, MD, interim executive director of Wyoming Medical Center, said 40 patients with COVID-19 were hospitalized there that day, five of them in the ICU.

Dr. Bleicher said those COVID patients made up 30 percent of the patients in the hospital, "by far the highest percentage of any disease we've ever had in this hospital.

"We've had to switch private rooms to semi-private rooms. We've had to get dozens of emergency nurses from outside this area," he said. "We have physicians stretching, changing their roles, everything they can do to help us care for patients."

Dr. Bleicher said he had gotten calls from hospitals in neighboring states with requests to transfer patients to Wyoming Medical Center. But he's had to turn them away.

If the surge continues, he will have to turn away patients from other Wyoming communities as well, he said.

"At some point, if things do not change, we will not be able to take care of the patients within Natrona County," Dr. Bleicher


said. "We're stretching and stretching, but we'll get to a point where we're going to break, and we can't do any more."

Natrona County Health Officer Ghazi Ghanem, MD, said COVID-19 is, "putting a lot of pressure on our whole healthcare system. Our staff is getting infected from outside the hospital, but then they have to quarantine and are consequently unable to take care of the sick ones.

"Our nursing homes are also getting full with COVID," he said. "This is changing the way we take care of our elderly people. Some people are choosing to stay in the nursing homes and go on comfort care. This is serious.

"We need to slow this down," by wearing masks and doing everything possible to slow the spread of the disease, Dr. Ghanem said.

"If we don't, there will be consequences," he said. "This is the time to take action. This is the time to say, 'I will do my part.'

"I'm asking you to be a good citizen, a good neighbor, a good friend, a responsible human being. Let's get this done." 

WORKING TOGETHER WORKS FOR EVERYONE

Cigna salutes the Wyoming Medical Society for being a staunch advocate for health care providers. We also support their commitment to improving the health of Wyoming's citizens. Together, we're making Wyoming a healthier place.



Together, all the way.®

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