

March 25, 2020

Our Livingston HealthCare (LHC) staff is working tirelessly with preparedness. Medical communities around the world are beginning to share experiences, observations, and evidence. Nonetheless, this particular challenge requires creativity and collective brain power. The response of this organization and the community has been truly remarkable.

Our creative staff—along with skilled community members—are preparing to locally manufacture all of the personal protective equipment (PPE) we doctors and nurses need to care for infectious disease. We are not assuming PPE will be available from usual supply chains.

The LHC website is updated regularly and has information on COVID-19 testing. We will continue to communicate directly to the community on a regular basis through our website and Facebook page.

Our registered nurse hotline is busy. It can be accessed by calling the hospital main phone number (406.222.3541). I sure encourage calling and talking through symptoms of acute illness and gaining this expert advice on who should be tested, who should quarantine at home, and how to care for self and family.

We can test anyone with active symptoms (testing at this point is not performed if one does not have symptoms of illness). A simple call to the hospital main number and a conversation with the nursing staff on the hotline can secure a time for testing.

The state health department has requested widespread testing. Larger communities in Montana are just standing up drive-in or drive-through testing sites in the last two days. LHC did not wait: Twelve days ago, we stood up a drive-in testing clinic and have tested broadly those with symptoms of acute respiratory illness. To my knowledge, this was the first such clinic in the state.

We remain in Park County in a position of great opportunity. We have tested over 150 patients with active respiratory symptoms and all have been negative (but we await tests from yesterday). We have the best data in the state to suggest that we locked down before arrival of wide community spread of COVID-19 in Park County.

We still have influenza A in the community and we all need to get well. Five other common viral infections appear to be subsiding because of our lockdown. This is beneficial for two reasons: It is best to be well if we were to catch COVID-19, and the absence of these others symptoms makes the new onset of fever and respiratory symptoms more likely to be this new illness (greater sensitivity).

This last point is very important. We anticipate the arrival (soon we hope) of a rapid diagnostic test for COVID-19 (instead of the 48 hours required at the state lab—they are doing the best they can). *If* we can all prevent a surge of infections now, know that a NEW onset of fever and respiratory symptoms has a high likelihood to be this disease. If individuals can be rapidly tested on day one after developing symptoms of COVID-19—when they have had contact after symptom onset with two other people, rather than day ten of symptoms when they have had 20 contacts—then we have a way forward to “live with” a present, but low, controllable level of this disease. Long term, of course, we need effective treatments that prevent life-threatening disease, and vaccines that simply prevent the disease. I am confident that both are coming. We can do this!

We live in a remarkable age of medical technology. What we need is time, and time is what we can all deliver if we stay focused—enforce for the time being this social distancing—and educate and speak out to others to do the same.

Sincerely,
Dr. Coleman, Chief Medical Officer
Livingston HealthCare