

NewsHealthNews

News Based on facts, either observed and verified directly by the reporter, or reported and verified from knowledgeable sources.

Valley Med coronavirus outbreak underscores risks for health care workers

Nurses say they are terrified of becoming ill with COVID-19



THE SOBRATO PAVILION AT VALLEY MEDICAL CENTER IS PHOTOGRAPHED IN SAN JOSE, CALIF., ON WEDNESDAY, FEB. 20, 2019. (RANDY VAZQUEZ/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP)

By **EMILY DERUY** | ederuy@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
PUBLISHED: April 14, 2020 at 3:57 p.m. | UPDATED: April 16, 2020 at 9:14 a.m.

Bay Area health care workers are expressing frustration and alarm after a deadly coronavirus outbreak at Santa Clara Valley Medical Center raised a fundamental question: Can hospitals keep doctors and nurses on the front-lines from spreading the disease among themselves?

Some hospitals are adopting novel approaches to treating patients sickened by the highly contagious disease, like video chats instead of in-room visits. But the challenges of performing round-the-clock care during a pandemic, often with limited medical supplies and protective gear, are clearly mounting.



A HALL IN THE SOBRATO PAVILION AT VALLEY MEDICAL CENTER IS PHOTOGRAPHED IN SAN JOSE, CALIF., ON WEDNESDAY, FEB. 20, 2019. (RANDY VAZQUEZ/BAY AREA NEWS GROUP)

Valley Medical said it had strict procedures and cleaning processes in place, from screening everyone entering the hospital for fever and requiring employees with symptoms to stay home to mandating that everyone wear surgical masks and practice good hygiene.

But six employees with [ties to a single unit at the county-run hospital in San Jose](#) became ill last month, with four testing positive for COVID-19, one assumed to be positive and one believed to have died as a result of the virus.



“Health care workers across the board are very anxious about there not being a consistent protocol,” said Linda Hurley, a nurse at Santa Clara Valley Medical and an officer on the board of the nurses’ union, the Registered Nurses Professional Association.

The hospital is investigating a whistleblower complaint that claimed administrators failed to notify the staff of the outbreak and that managers on a second-floor unit who were infected with COVID-19 returned to work while they were still sick and may have spread the virus.

Nurses across the region expressed their fears in interviews and emails to the Bay Area News Group but asked to remain anonymous because they were concerned about losing their jobs. They say safety measures aren’t enough and worry about spreading the disease to loved ones at home.

People can be infected with the coronavirus without showing symptoms, so screenings at hospital entries aren’t a catchall, they say. Social distancing isn’t realistic if multiple nurses or doctors need to tend to a patient at the same time. And while personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves are crucial, nurses’ unions say there’s a lack of adequate supplies at some facilities.

“They fear for their safety, for their patients’ safety, for their family’s safety, and for their co-workers’ safety,” National Nurses United Executive Director Bonnie Castillo said in a statement.

But some Bay Area hospitals, especially in the heart of Silicon Valley, say they’re trying to be creative about stopping the spread of the virus, with promising results.

Stanford Hospital supplies each patient with an iPad so doctors can video chat with them without having to don protective gear and enter their rooms. And the hospital has switched to hand-held ultrasound devices covered in disposable plastic sheaths from the machines that needed to be wheeled from room to room.

“It really, really reduces the infection risk,” said Sam Shen, clinical associate professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine. “It’s always good to have good cleaning protocols, but it’s even better if you can just avoid infection potential from the start.” So far no staff member has infected other staff members.

Going virtual has, perhaps ironically, allowed for a less-frightening, more-human experience in some cases. Nurses and doctors must dress head to toe in protective gear with their faces obscured when they treat coronavirus patients.

But with tablets, “we can interact, showing our faces with the iPad in the patient’s room instead of having masks and goggles and hair pieces in,” said Patrice Callagy, executive director of emergency services at Stanford.

At Walnut Creek-based John Muir Health, health care workers use video baby monitors to communicate with patients and run IVs outside patient rooms with extended tubing protected by pool noodles, said spokesman Ben Drew.

The system has tested 54 doctors and employees for possible work-related exposure to the virus, Drew said, but all have come back negative.

Good Samaritan Hospital in San Jose this week received a shipment of clear boxes to encase infectious patients being intubated, to trap disease-carrying droplets before the virus can spread into the atmosphere.

“We have had less than 10 health care workers that have been out on quarantine,” chief nursing officer Mark Brown said, “and most of it was out of an over-abundance of caution where we thought there was possible exposure.”

Still there is always some risk of exposure to the virus, Maury Kendall, a Valley Medical spokesman, acknowledged in an email.

“Despite all of our hospital and community efforts to protect against the virus, some of our healthcare workers have tested or will test positive for COVID-19 and are out sick,” Kendall wrote.

But some Valley Medical workers say there's a lack of information from management, which leaves them more vulnerable to infection.

"Many of us feel we're not being told we've been exposed," said Hurley, the nurse.

While several hospitals said they notify and monitor colleagues who have contact with an employee who tests positive, Kendall sidestepped a question about whether the county system does the same.

"There is widespread ongoing transmission of COVID-19 in the community," he said in an email response. "We advise all employees to take precautions in the workplace at all times as if they have been potentially exposed to COVID-19."



Emily DeRuy | Reporter Emily DeRuy covers housing for the Bay Area News Group. Prior to that, she covered the city of San Jose. Earlier in her career she wrote about education for The Atlantic in Washington, D.C.

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/04/14/deadly-valley-med-coronavirus-outbreak-underscores-risks-for-healthcare-workers/>