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Coronavirus: A day in the Bay Area's busiest COVID-19 ward

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RESPIRATORY THERAPIST CHARLOTTE NIRONA, FRONT, AND REGISTERED NURSE REENA POULARD TEND TO A COVID PATIENT AT REGIONAL MEDICAL CENTER HOSPITAL IN SAN JOSE ON MAY 22, 2020.

Photo: Chloe Aftel / Special to The Chronicle

As the coronavirus sprawled out across the country in March and April, no hospital in the Bay Area counted more cases than Regional Medical Center of San Jose.

In Santa Clara County, the site of the first coronavirus outbreak in California and home of the virus' first recorded death in the U.S., Regional quickly emerged as an epicenter within an epicenter, caring for an average of 56 patients a day at its peak.

The Chronicle got a rare glimpse of the work nurses and doctors have been doing in the COVID-19 ward in late May, when the patient count had thinned to 16, including both confirmed cases and those under investigation.

Plastered outside of each patient's room was at least one warning sign screaming at all those who enter: STOP, sanitize and gear up.

Throughout the day, people in blue smocks and masks tended to their patients. Many of those suffering from COVID-19 were in medically induced comas. They would never see the faces of those watching over them. For the ones who were awake, the sense of isolation was palpable. "We must look like alien creatures to these people," said Liz Thurstone, a registered nurse. "The loneliness and isolation has been very hard for patients. I think it's also been hard for nurses, too."

As of last week, Regional's doctors and nurses had treated a total of 1,990 patients who had symptoms of COVID-19. Ultimately, 274 of those patients tested positive — 44 died from the illness.

The grim tally could have been catastrophically higher without the people in this building. Regional staff acknowledged that it's a scary time to be in a hospital — for everyone — but the medical workers stressed one central point: If you're sick, come to us. We can help you.

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