Chester & Delaware County Medical Societies

COVID-19 Update – December 8, 2020

The December 8th COVID-19 Zoom Conference for Chester & Delaware County physicians and other medical professionals included over ninety (90) people - hospital based and community primary care and infectious disease physicians, as well as many other specialists and subspecialists. Other participants included local public health officials, behavioral health professionals, representatives from long-term care facilities, and staff from the Pennsylvania Medical Society. This conference was the fourteenth in a series of evening Zoom calls that were coordinated by the staff and leadership of the Chester & Delaware County Medical Societies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The program ran from 7:00 pm until 8:45 pm.

Dr. Bruce Colley, (CCMS President) and Dr. George Avetian, (DCMS President) welcomed everyone on behalf of the county medical societies and encouraged all local physicians to become active members of their county medical societies and the Pennsylvania Medical Society.

The Roundtable Update included reports by Ronald B. Anderson, MD (Main Line Health); Brad Bendesky, MD (Trinity Health – Fitzgerald Mercy Hospital); Dina F. Capalongo, DO & Gary Zimmer, MD (Crozer Health); Mian A. Jan, MD (University of Pennsylvania Health System and Chester County Hospital); Raida Rahab, MD (Tower Health) and Kathy Willey, MD (Christina Health System).

Each hospital/health system representative reported a significant increase in the number of patients who are presently being treated as in-patients over the past several weeks with local hospitals now at 80 – 90% of their capacity. It was noted that staffing has become a challenge in many medical practices, hospitals and long-term care facilities because a significant number of front-line physicians, nurses and other direct care personnel are infected or are presently in quarantine due to their exposure to patients and co-workers with active COVID-19 symptoms.

It was also noted that employee-to-employee transmission and staff members with infected family members have surfaced as serious concerns and that each of the hospitals are actively planning for the delivery and distribution of the Pfizer vaccine in the coming week.

The use of tele-medicine communication between physicians and patients has increased again with the recent surge in cases, as many patients are reluctant to schedule in-person appointments with their healthcare providers. It was also reported that several hospitals are planning to limit visitors to patients and to also cancel or limit elective procedures for the time being, as recommended by the PA Department of Health.
On the positive side, the overall mortality rate of infected patients has diminished by as much as 25% as the medical community has learned more about the best practices to treat patients with COVID-19. The number of patients who require intubation and ventilators has also dropped significantly. The availability of testing for COVID-19 has greatly improved in the past month, with large community testing programs being conducted locally by county government and health systems. It was also noted that the pandemic has more drastically affected the Hispanic and African American communities.

Ronald B. Anderson, MD provided an update on the development of several COVID-19 vaccines, noting that worldwide, approximately one-hundred ninety (190) vaccines are in various stages of pre-clinical development. Two vaccines, produced by Pfizer and Moderna, appear to be in the final stages before FDA approval for emergency use. Dr. Anderson described the variety of new technologies which have been applied in developing these vaccines and further mentioned challenges in the manufacturing, shipping and storage of the vaccine(s).

It was reported that local hospital administrators and public health officials have been very busy coordinating the final plans for distributing the vaccine, beginning with front-line hospital clinical and support staff, residents and staff of long-term care facilities and other high-risk groups. It was noted that community physicians with current hospital staff privileges should contact the medical staff office at their hospital to register for the vaccine. It was reported that vaccines will be available for staff members of the Trinity Health System at Fitzgerald Mercy, the Main Line Health System at one of the MLH hospitals and that the Crozer Health System will utilize two of their hospitals to vaccinate physicians and other Crozer staff.

Medical practices can register to participate as a COVID-19 Vaccination Program Provider through enrollment with the Pennsylvania DOH/CDC. The DOH Vaccination Program Provider Support website is: https://www.health.pa.gov/topics/programs/immunizations/Pages/COVID-19-Vaccine-Providers.aspx For additional assistance pertaining to the program, physicians can send email to: ra-dhcovidvax@pa.gov or contact the DOH staff at (717)-787-5681.

Jeanne E. Casner, MPH, PMP, Public Health Director from the Chester County Health Department provided an overview and answered questions concerning county government’s plans for vaccine distribution in Chester and Delaware Counties. Ms. Casner mentioned the expansion of testing throughout both counties and plans to offer testing and vaccine administration at the large-scale public sites which the county be coordinating. Ms. Casner also reported that the health department is working with schools, businesses, congregate care settings and other stakeholders to help them safely keep their doors open but that more emergency closures may be ordered by the state if the surge continues to escalate in the coming weeks.
Chester County Coroner Christian VandePol, MD reported that there has been a recent increase in deaths due to the Corona Virus and that as of December 7th four hundred thirty-nine (439) people died in Chester County from COVID-19. It was noted that during this period eight-hundred ninety (890) people died in Delaware County. Chesco Health Department has reported that to date there have been fourteen-thousand three hundred (14,300) positive COVID-19 cases in Chester County (with 53% female) and twenty-three thousand three hundred (23,300) positive COVID-19 cases in Delaware County (with 54% being female). Dr VandePol thanked all of the community physicians for remembering to properly report COVID-19 as the cause of death, when appropriate.

Robin L. Rothermel, Senior Director, Physician Support, Pennsylvania Medical Society provided a brief overview of the PA DOH Plans for distributing the vaccine to county governments throughout the Commonwealth and it was noted that a separate plan is in-place for the City of Philadelphia. Ms. Rothermel reported that PAMED staff are involved in regular meetings with PA DOH Secretary Rachel Levine, MD and senior staff from DOH and that the medical society is preparing a vaccine FAQ for members which will be available on the PAMED website – www.pamedsoc.org.

Mark Austerberry, Executive Director, Philadelphia County Medical Society reported on plans to revive the “Helping the Helpers COVID-19 Support Group” virtual meetings for physicians and all other front-line medical/healthcare workers. It was noted that these support group meetings are facilitated by licensed counselors from Springfield Psychological and that individuals may participate anonymously. For more information on the “Helping the Helpers” support group meetings see www.chestercms.org or www.delcomedsoc.org.