

Doctor's Day: Five Tallahassee physicians look back at 'surreal' year of COVID

Marina Brown

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After a year fighting COVID-19, Tallahassee doctors grieve, find benefits in telemedicine and encourage vaccinations in this “defining moment in history.”

The battle with COVID-19 is far from over. But in recent weeks, vaccinations have increased, infections have fallen, and hospitalizations were at one point zero at Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare.

This time last year hospitalizations were climbing toward the first of two apexes, one in July and August and a second, November thorough January. On March 26, TMH reported seven inpatients positive for the virus as of Monday. Capital Regional Medical Center’s inpatient numbers dropped to four people positive for the virus.

Now, on National Doctor's Day, March 30, 2021, local doctors look back at how things stand.

though it is not time for a victory parade, it is perhaps a time for reflection on the past year — in this case, from the vantage point of several TMH-affiliated physicians: Dr. Thomas Noel, Interventional cardiologist and Chair of Cardiology at TMH; Dr. Tod Morris, Medical Oncologist; Dr. Adam Oliver, Director Neuroendovascular Surgery; Dr. William Dobak, Maternal-fetal Medicine Specialist; and Dr. Heemanshi Shah, Medical Director of the TMH Hospitalist Group.

Some of these physicians have been on the very worst of the front lines in the battle against the virus. Others have learned to accommodate to myriad required restrictions to keep their patients safe. And each of them says they are grateful for the vaccines that will one day permit the word, “normalcy” to be in our vocabularies again.

Dr. Tod Morris, Medical Oncology

On March 30, 2020, the USComfortNV, sailed into the port of New York. The large, white, former Navy tanker, with a huge red cross on its side, was there to take on seriously ill COVID patients as New York hospitals reached capacity.

Dr. Tod Morris was the senior physician on the ship. Over five-weeks, he says they treated 182 patients in their ICU, as equipment, space, and oxygen supplies in the city became scarce.

However, Morris, who had served aboard the Navy hospital ship for the previous three years, was to make his transition to civilian life during the summer with his arrival at TMH as a medical oncologist. He looks back on the last year at how he needed to adjust in his new practice to keep patients safe.



“At the worst of the surge, we employed telemedicine... and it was certainly a help,” he says. “But now, I’m able to see more people in the clinic. Of course, in Medical Oncology, patients must come here to receive their chemotherapeutic treatments, and in reality, because this virus has made us all so isolated, the wonderful nurses and technicians at the Cancer Center, have helped to offer excellent psycho-social support.”

He notes that the TMH Cancer Center has taken all sanitary precautions and the environment there he believes to be very safe.

As to vaccines, Morris adds, “There are some cancer patients who cannot make antibodies due to their conditions, but otherwise, we encourage our patients to get vaccinated.” He acknowledges, as do all of the physicians, that some patients are hesitant or non-believers in the vaccinations. But each of the doctors we spoke with hopes to educate those they see as to the benefits.

Dr. Thomas Noel, Cardiology

One can almost hear a sigh as Dr. Thomas Noel thinks back on the early days in March and April 2020, “when everything felt uncertain, and now, how far we’ve come.” He offers kudos to TMH for stepping up with expedient distribution of masks, gloves, gowns, disinfectants, reducing the numbers of visitors, preparing a pop-up testing site in the parking garage, and making telemedicine available.

“Telemedicine has been a way to remain in contact with our patients and even provide a new “dimension” to understanding them individually,” he says.

“Sometimes, seeing them in their home setting, in their own environment, feels more personal. At times, it allows me to assess what challenges might be there. I think we’ll be seeing more telemedicine in the future.”



In addition to encouraging every patient to receive the vaccine when it is available to them, Dr. Noel also notes the importance of exercise. “We may see more people walking on the streets now, but actually, the over-all level of exercise has decreased during the pandemic. And good nutrition — healthy eating — has dropped off. Hopefully, soon, those two important markers of good health will return.”

Dr. Adam Oliver, Neurovascular Surgeon, Tallahassee Neurological Clinic

Though affiliated with Tallahassee Memorial Health Care, the Tallahassee Neurological Clinic is a separate practice.

Dr. Adam Oliver says that there was a time last year when he wasn’t certain if his office, which performs many surgeries on the brain and spine, “would still be in business.”

“We needed to suspend elective surgeries. We didn’t want patients coming into our office setting when so little was known about contagion of this virus.” He says that

though no employees needed to be furloughed, staff hours were reduced, physicians went without paychecks, and the practice received a PPP government loan.



Nevertheless, the doctors were on call throughout the time when TMH's designated COVID unit was ramping up. Oliver says that he was involved in treatment of the clotting irregularities that COVID patients were beginning to demonstrate. "April of last year was... surreal," he said.

Today, things are back to a "new normal." At Oliver's office, there are fewer waiting room chairs, and temperature checks, masks, constant cleaning of surfaces, and sanitizer hubs are standard. He wears safety glasses and says he changes scrubs frequently during the day. Yet though noting he is "optimistic for the future," Oliver is very much a scientific realist.

"I think we will still be wearing masks for at least a year. Even with the vaccine, which we should all take when available, we should take precautions. Flattening the curve is the goal, but if you think it will be eliminated totally... I doubt it."

Oliver describes this time as a "defining moment in history." He believes that "we must learn to live with this virus in the safest way possible, and not just think we can ride it out until it is gone."

Dr. William Dobak, Maternal and Fetal Medical Specialist

Dr. William Dobak, whose practice involves bringing new life into the world, admits to a tremendous sense of relief as he sees the numbers of COVID-infections "plummet" since the arrival of the vaccine, and the way in which Tallahassee has for the most part, subscribed to other safety protocols.

"Looking in the rearview mirror, though, I grieve for those who were lost, and feel empathy for their families, and those with "long-COVID" complications. Doctors too have lost loved ones and missed being able to be near at the end."



That sobering pall extended to expectant families who at a typical time of joy at the arrival of a new life, found pregnant mothers anxious and concerned for a child who would enter into a pandemic-filled world.

“It was difficult that during deliveries, the moment couldn’t be shared,” Dobak said. One preliminary finding, he notes, is that COVID antibodies have been found in a newborn whose mother had received the vaccine. Other accounts describe antibodies also in mother’s milk.

He advises his mothers-to-be to get the vaccine while they’re pregnant if they’re able. “Sadly, there is still hesitation, even in this highly-educated community,” Dobak said. He said there were some pregnant women in Intensive Care with severe COVID disease during the last year, but that most did well.

Considering the changes over the last year, Dobak’s office has limited waiting room space, allowed for some reduction in number of patient appointments, and is using telemedicine more, though he notes that its usefulness is limited, given the need for obtaining laboratory values and, for instance, listening to fetal heartbeats and mother’s lungs.

“We are following best practice guidelines in every detail,” Dobak said, and adds that currently we’re in a “virus versus variant” contest, and now is not the time to let our defenses down.

Dr Heemanshi Shah, Medical Director of TMH Hospitalist Group

Almost exactly at the midway point in March, Tallahassee Memorial Healthcare reported “no inpatients” with a COVID diagnosis. A milestone, to be sure, and though she says that, “We made it through,” it seems that Dr. Heemanshi Shah remains on alert should she need to revise her opinion.

In fact, Shah, who led the hospital's preparation plans for setting up a dedicated COVID unit and the training for its personnel, says that four patients have been admitted since that zero number — “though, I think they'll be being discharged soon.”



“When we understood what was happening in New York in March of 2020, we began preparation for up to 300 possible patients,” she said. “But we never got to more than 50-60 at one time.”

Her planning and that of the TMH administration and staff included six physicians for the COVID unit, “so that there were always three on duty, and about 10 nurses.”

Speaking quietly as someone who has been on the front lines, and for whom little will be surprising, she says, “There were teams set up for pulmonary critical care, respiratory therapy, training given in use of BiPap machines, and high-level oxygen use. We had plenty of personal protective equipment, nasal cannulas, and ventilators... And even the community helped in providing oxygen tanks for when patients were discharged to home.”

Shah, along with her husband and daughter, is also hosting her parents from New York, who, she says, “Got trapped here when my father got sick before COVID.” And awareness of their health was in her mind one year ago when so much was unknown about this virus. “At that time, we were just giving vitamins, oxygen, and plasma... we had a lot to learn.” Today, when a patient presents with mild to moderate respiratory distress, Dr. Shah says that “steroids and Remdesivir” are often the treatments of choice unless contraindicated. Clotting issues she says have successfully been treated with anticoagulants.

When asked to look into the rearview mirror at the last 12-months, she recounts that her best memory is “the team effort among the hospitalists, the medical personnel, and the administration of TMH.” Her worst recollections are sitting beside patients who would not get better, but feeling grateful to bring human compassion when families could not.

“I think that we will continue to experience “waves of COVID infections” into the future. The thing is to avoid complications by having had the vaccine. But I believe that as a community, we have learned and become stronger.” And now, we mustn’t forget.

Contact Marina Brown at: mcdb100@comcast.net