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UW Health: eICU helps rural hospitals manage latest COVID-19 surge

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MADISON, Wis. – The pandemic has thrust the use of virtual meeting technology to the center of everyday life, and that even includes the intensive care unit.

Rural hospitals throughout Wisconsin and northern Illinois are facing a daunting task caused by a new wave of COVID-19 cases in their emergency rooms corresponding with already full hospitals. This is made far worse in many of these hospitals because often they have very little intensive care unit space, or the expertise to care for those patients.

To assist, UW Health expanded the use of a program started in 2008, called the eICU program. As its name suggests, it is a virtual intensive care unit where nurses and doctors in a large room at a UW Health office building in Madison, monitor and provide care to patients in currently seven hospitals and eight ICUs across Wisconsin and northern Illinois 24 hours a day, according to Lynn Jacobs, nursing supervisor, eICU, UW Health.

“We’ve partnered with hospitals for many years now, and this program has allowed us to play a pivotal role during this terrible pandemic surge helping rural hospitals that are just not designed to handle this severity and volume of illness,” she said.

Doctors called intensivists and specially trained ICU nurses and nursing assistants work in front of large banks of monitors that display, in real time, the same information doctors and nurses at the partner hospitals see. The monitors also allow the staff to activate a live video feed option into a patient room to assess and

monitor the patients in bed, and they can alert partner hospital staff on site when trouble arises, Jacobs said.

One of these hospital partners is Aspirus Medford Hospital, where the eICU has helped care for about 44 ICU patients diagnosed with COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic, according to Jessica Faude, interim vice president of patient care services, Aspirus Medford Hospital.

“The eICU has helped tremendously in our COVID care, especially this second go-round with the COVID surge where we are seeing a lot more severely sick patients, and a lot more patients who are a lot younger than we’ve cared for,” she said. “And the vast majority are unvaccinated.”

Because patients can’t often be transferred to other hospitals due to a lack of available ICU beds throughout the state, the eICU has been invaluable, Faude said, plus keeping patients close to home is central to Aspirus Medford Hospital’s care plan for these patients.

“It has really been huge since we encountered issues with bed availability,” she said.

Aspirus Medford Hospital has been an eICU partner institution since 2017, and that relationship has helped its readiness for the COVID-19 pandemic because they had the trust and relationship with UW Health eICU personnel to train the hospital’s staff to care for COVID-19 patients, Faude said.

“I have partner hospitals that don’t have this service and they are struggling,” she said. “I feel we are way ahead of the game because we’ve had this program for a few years.”

At all its partner hospitals and UW Health’s facilities, the eICU has helped care for about 1,300 COVID-19 ICU patients since the beginning of 2020. In 2021, about 25% of the eICU admissions with a diagnosis of COVID-19 have occurred in the last six weeks, Jacobs said.

The relationship is not a one-way street where UW Health only helps gives direction and guidance to rural hospitals, but is a true collaboration, according to Dr. Jeff Wells, medical director, eICU, UW Health.

The UW Health eICU staff collaborate closely with each unique partner

hospital to improve quality of care with the eICU providing valuable data related to patient care, he said.

"It's a whole second side you are not seeing, it helps make things better for the next patient to come and the next patient after that," he said. "We partner with our sites to provide the best possible care to take care of these patients."

Recorded interviews with Jacobs, Faude and Wells are available, as well as B-roll of the eICU facility.