

10 healthcare execs on public health education amid the pandemic

Katie Adams – August 10, 2020

Hospitals, health systems and healthcare organizations have been thrust even further into the role of public health educator during the pandemic, as the public continues to face conflicting guidelines, conspiracy theories and an information overload.

Here, 10 healthcare executives discuss their organizations' roles and responsibilities as public health educators.

David Entwistle, president and CEO, Stanford (Calif.) Health Care: As an academic medical center, Stanford Medicine has a continuous role in public health education — as much for our patients and the public as for fellow care providers and health researchers. Managing our patients' health as well as our hospital capacity depends on many factors outside the hospital, including how well our community adheres to public health guidelines set by the state and local counties. We see our role in reinforcing those guidelines and providing access to additional resources to educate our community about the virus.

Our efforts span from [public and patient education](#) to [recommendations and guidelines for critical care providers](#). Our animated video, "[Stop the Spread](#)," has reached nearly a million views worldwide. We created a free [app for first responders](#) with expert screening information and guidance. A banner across the top of every page of our Stanford Health Care public website directs users to a [COVID-19 resource page](#). Additionally, the Stanford Medicine [COVID-19 website](#) provides news and guidance along with graphs tracking the status of the pandemic, as well as information about our COVID-19 research efforts and opportunities to participate in research. Through our [Stanford Med Live Town Hall](#) events and [Department of Medicine Grand Rounds](#), we communicate the latest information on changes at our hospitals, as well as on clinical care and research. Stanford Medicine Dean Lloyd Minor's "[fireside chat](#)" with [Dr. Anthony Fauci](#) brought this conversation live to virtual viewers nationally, and our experts make themselves available regularly to news media in order to reach the general public with the most accurate and reliable information about the virus and research for treatments and vaccines. These are just a sampling of our public health education efforts during the pandemic, which we continue to expand and distribute.

Darren Grubb, vice president of communications, Steward Health Care (Dallas): Like many hospital systems and care providers, we embedded basic public health messages in all communications — including those posted throughout our facilities— to educate the public on: prevention (i.e. social distancing, hand-washing, wearing masks etc.), symptoms to be on the lookout for (fever, shortness of breath, cough, headache, diarrhea, muscle aches, loss of smell/taste, etc.), and calling their doctor first before leaving their home if they were symptomatic

In my estimation, our bigger educational responsibility has been to encourage people not to ignore or dismiss serious symptoms out of fear of visiting a clinical environment, either a primary care provider or an emergency department. Steward has been diligent in communicating this message to patients and the public, in part by sharing the many protocols we've instituted as an organization to ensure their safety in all our facilities, and reminding them to not delay medical care.

Ken Chaplin, chief marketing officer, Cancer Treatment Centers of America (Boca Raton, Fla.): During the pandemic, when U.S. hospitals and the overall healthcare system was stressed and strained, many procedures and appointments were delayed or canceled— some because of federal guidelines, others by patients' choice or other circumstances. And while stay-at-home orders and delayed elective procedures have helped flatten the COVID-19 curve, we are now concerned that a new wave of cancer diagnoses may follow in the coming months or years. New federal guidelines have lifted restrictions on nonessential procedures, allowing hospitals to welcome more patients back for follow-up appointments, elective procedures and cancer screening and diagnostic tests. It is our responsibility to reassure people that if they have had growing concerns about their cancer risk or have symptoms of concern, now is the time to consult their doctor. It is important to reschedule a planned cancer screening procedure as soon as possible.

Ann Martorano, chief communications officer and administrator, Halifax Health (Daytona Beach, Fla.): Making informed healthcare decisions in today's world of nonstop information and consumer-driven healthcare has never been more difficult. The stakes are high when it comes to health, and the wrong healthcare decisions can mean the difference between life and death. As our area's only public, community-owned health system, we have always felt it our responsibility to proactively provide transparency and clarity of information to help guide our residents in making appropriate medical choices. This approach has been well-received, and our residents look to us as a trusted voice to guide them. This has never been more evident or important than during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

Don Stanziano, chief marketing & communications officer, Geisinger Health (Danville, Pa.): I believe health systems not only have a responsibility to provide public health education, it is also a smart strategy. Geisinger sees health education as part of our mission. During COVID-19, like many other providers, we aggressively disseminated prevention messages and materials in English and Spanish across our service area. Safety kits were shared with local businesses and schools to promote social distancing, masking and hand hygiene. We held webinars in partnership with local chambers of commerce. Beyond COVID-19, from our health blog and quarterly magazine *PA Health*, to e-newsletters, content shared on social, and health education programs and classes, we have an always-on approach to health education and awareness that spans the full spectrum of health topics, from the importance of getting a flu shot to how to safely exercise after heart surgery. Our strategy is to be a trusted health partner to our communities, patients and members with the goal to help everyone live their healthiest life.

Joan Gubernick, chief marketing officer, Einstein Healthcare Network

(Philadelphia): Einstein's commitment to the community includes a responsibility to serve as a source of truth and provide information to enhance the overall public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all brand marketers and healthcare communication teams have helped to amplify the work done by public health educators. How could we not? The pandemic is too big and too integrated into every aspect of care. We are all the public. Questions come from everywhere, constantly.

At Einstein, we cannot market a service line without thinking holistically. What is each person's unique need and then what are ours to be able to serve them? Our doctors and researchers are the experts. Then we decipher, translate and humanize the information to educate and comfort the public.

Adrian Stanton, vice president of business development and community relations, Virginia Hospital Center (Arlington):

Even in normal times, the intricacies of the healthcare delivery system are complex and can be confusing, which makes clear communication with the public so critical. But now, in the midst of a global pandemic, the need for clear communication of accurate information is even greater because information can help reduce confusion and anxiety during uncertain times. For Virginia Hospital Center and our patients, that includes consistent everyday messages about the importance of healthy behaviors and preventative care to the necessity of taking safety precautions such as regular hand-washing, social distancing and mask-wearing during the time of COVID-19.

Catherine S. Harrell, chief marketing officer, Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady Health System (Baton Rouge, La.):

Hospitals and health systems have always had a responsibility to be a credible source of truth to their communities with advocacy built around scientific, evidenced-based public health information. COVID-19 has magnified the barrage of messages consumers receive with new recognition of an individual's difficulty in sorting out fact from fiction and opinion, especially about prevention and treatment of the virus. As guardians of public trust, healthcare organizations are compelled to provide facts and rebut intentional misinformation campaigns, which are so easily spread online. Good medicine is based on science and responsible practice. Good health is based on the same, and that's the business we're in. Eventually this pandemic will be behind us, but the need for public health education will continue, and healthcare's clear and credible voice must never be drowned out.

Lori Howley, executive director of corporate communications and chief marketing officer, MelroseWakefield Healthcare (Melrose, Mass.):

As a community healthcare provider, our ability to connect with our communities on all health matters is important. The past few months have been a testament to that. Sharing important messages on ways to help minimize the impact of the coronavirus outbreak was critical to everyone's well-being and safety and our ability to do our job well. Many community groups turned to us for guidance, and we were seen as a trusted partner in the response. These relationships are equally important in support of wellness initiatives — everything from heart health and cancer prevention to identifying food insecurity and addressing racial disparities in the course of care.

Daniella Gratale, director of child health policy and advocacy, Nemours Children's Health System (Orlando, Fla.): Nemours Children's Health System has keenly observed how the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequality in healthcare, and it is ever more important for health leaders to serve as educators to ensure children receive the best care, both preventative as well as medical, to help them maximize their health and well-being throughout their lives. In addition to Nemours' direct patient communications throughout COVID-19, Nemours' [KidsHealth.org](https://www.kidshealth.org), which is the No. 1 most-visited website for pediatric health information in the U.S., has served as a trusted resource throughout the pandemic, providing real-time information on COVID-19 with advice for families on how to stay healthy physically as well as socially and emotionally.

With two freestanding hospitals and care sites spanning five states, Nemours cares for a wide range of children geographically who come from diverse backgrounds. Prior to the pandemic, the role of public health educator had become increasingly important. Nemours has developed numerous initiatives and worked with a variety of partners, dedicated to addressing social determinants of health. We focus on policies and practices to improve food insecurity, well care, nutrition, physical activity, health literacy, reading readiness and immunizations as we know chronic illness and disease are greatly reduced when we consider the whole child. A key component of this work is education to parents, caregivers and children and adolescents on how to build assets that can bolster health and well-being.