

Report from Don Kraitsik, M.D., Gallup, New Mexico on COVID Treatment for Navajo, Zuni, and Apache Peoples

I continue to practice Family Medicine on a part-time basis at Gallup Indian Medical Center, taking care of Navajo, Zuni, Apache, and other beneficiaries. My usual outpatient care of long-time patients has been totally disrupted. All appointments are cancelled, and I spend hours on the phone doing a variation of Telemedicine. Included in my current tasks is notifying people that their CoVid19 test is positive. Many patients have no phone, no service, no answering machine, no texting, and do not have a home. When I finally do make contact with them, they are suspicious at first, thinking I might be a bill collector, and I have to convince them who I am. Some significant portion of patients speak Navajo, which adds to the difficulty of such care. The Navajo nation has been hit hard by Coronavirus. In May 2020, the Navajo Nation surpassed New York and New Jersey in COVID-19 cases per capita.

Many of our patients are homeless, which of course adds to the difficulties of sheltering in home. And for those who have homes, running water is not guaranteed. About 30% to 40% of residents don't have running water, which makes following basic CDC guidelines, such as handwashing, almost impossible. Additionally, many people live together in multi-generational large family groups, often in very small homes and hogans. If one family member gets Coronavirus, everyone in the family gets exposed.

Our facility was an early adopter of respiratory precautions. We have been screening ALL persons entering all buildings. Everyone wears a mask, and I wash my hands innumerable times each day. I have been trained in the use of Personal Protective equipment, and I have learned various methods to reuse masks which are being rationed.

We have many patients admitted to the hospital with CoVid-19 and there are a number of patients in the ICU on ventilators at any one time. Most hospital wards have been converted to CoVid-19 units, and a nearby high school is being converted to a hospital step-down unit.

Our homeless patients recovering from CoVid-19, and also those with positive tests needing quarantine, are housed at four local motels, which are being rented by the government.

I am not on the front lines seeing sick CoVid-19 patients in consideration of my age.

Many of my younger colleagues are spending long days in full PPE providing quality medical care for very sick patients.

I salute, applaud, and honor all healthcare workers everywhere who are on the front lines.

I have been asked to serve on an oversight committee regarding Ventilator rationing if we come to a major surge and need to make moral/ethical decisions about who gets a ventilator.