



Interview with John Riccio, MD & Chief Medical Officer at Auburn Community Hospital (ACH)

Question: What is your organization's greatest challenge to resuming elective care?

JR: During any given week in prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, we would do approximately 575 elective procedures per month. We're now at zero. We made significant preparations to have capacity for a potential surge in COVID-19 patients. Thankfully, as a result of the shelter-in-place and physical-distancing measures and the opening of the Community First Respiratory Clinic, we are prepared for most any scenario including the threat of a Covid-19 second wave. During the course of this pandemic we have made multiple changes to the visitor policy, testing procedures, and operational efficiency to create the safest possible environment for patients.

Q: How is Auburn Community Hospital ensuring employees and patients are comfortable with reopening for elective care?

JR: To ensure patients can have elective surgeries in the safest possible environment, physician leadership and our Infection Prevention specialists at Auburn Community Hospital have developed a Health & Safety process to guide patients and staff on how Elective Surgery and other health care services will be prioritized and scheduled. This process includes significant new safety measures, surgery prioritization, testing procedures and incorporates the recommendations of the following healthcare organizations:

- American College of Surgeons
- American Society of Anesthesiologists
- Association of periOperative Registered Nurses
- American Hospital Association
- New York State Department of Health

The team has been meeting regularly to develop the plan that incorporates strict guidelines to ensure patients can have elective surgeries as soon as safely possible. The plan is a roadmap to guide readiness, prioritization and scheduling.

The roadmap includes timing, testing, equipment, surgical prioritization, scheduling, COVID-related safety and risk mitigation, patient communications, environmental cleaning, and regulatory guidance. ACH has been fortunate for only 5 admissions of Covid-19 positive cases in over 60 days with an average length of stay of less than 4 days. We have the ability to test patients and staff and have an adequate supply of personal protective equipment to treat patients.

Q: What precautions have you taken for employees and visitors throughout this public health crisis?

- ACH implemented a Public Health Emergency Plan for Covid-19. This included staff Travel restrictions and HR policies implemented to ensure employee and patient safety.
- ACH coordinates Covid-19 response with Cayuga County Health Department, NYS Dept. of Health as well as in-house Infection Prevention experts.
- An Internal & External Communications Plan is implemented including a new Covid-19 Resource Page on the ACH website. This site has updated information and resources for the community and hospital employees, including a daily update for all key internal and external audiences. The plan allows for seamless coordination and care for all employees.
- All healthcare professionals including nurses, physicians, CNA's epidemiologists, microbiologists, and medical technologists are retrained on emergency plans, infection prevention, social distancing, screening and appropriate public hygiene (following all CDC & NYS Department of Health Guidelines).
- All ACH non-clinical employees (House Keeping, Food Service, Maintenance, Security, Administrative, etc.) are retrained on Infection prevention and public hygiene mandates.
- ACH has significantly redesigned space in the hospital to accommodate a potential surge in Covid-19 patients in an effort to isolate these potential patients from all other patients in the hospital.
- All ER visitors are required to complete a health screening prior to entry to ACH. Visitor restrictions have been implemented since March.
- ACH restricts visitor access to the Hospital to protect the health and safety of patients and staff.
- Telehealth has been extensively implemented throughout ACH and local physician offices.
- Daily Staff Screening includes obtaining all employees' temperatures and filling out a symptom questionnaire prior to being allowed access to the hospital. We have also restricted access to the hospital to only 3 entrances.
- ACH opened the "ACH Community First Clinic" which is a Covid-19 Screening and Respiratory Care Clinic in the isolated former Cayuga County Nursing Home. The

purpose of this clinic is to provide a setting for patients who do not require emergent or urgent care from going to local physician offices and potentially increasing transfer of the virus. This clinic has allowed us to improve care of potential Covid-19 patients while protecting those that are not infected.

- ACH requires all employees wear a medical grade procedure mask at all times while in the hospital. This includes the local physician offices and Urgent Care Centers.

Q: How are you getting the word out to patients that you are resuming elective care?

JR: We are communicating to our patients using all media to encourage the community that it's safe to come to our hospital for care, and important not to risk delaying care when you need it. We want our patients to know that we are ready and able to resume elective surgery and have an adequate supply of PPE, have implemented all infection control measures, and are continuously monitoring patient safety to ensure our patients and staff are safe.

ACH is guided by The Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) standards for patient safety, infection prevention, and quality of care. ACH utilizes these standards to prevent healthcare-associated transmission. APIC is considered by many to be the standard for patient safety and infection prevention. Furthermore, we work in an extremely regulated industry. Throughout the year we are inspected by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention (CDC), NYS Department of Health, and the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Joint Commission.

Q: What other initiatives did you take to prepare for reopening the hospital for elective surgeries and ultimately all services?

JR: One key decision we made early on in this pandemic was to do everything we could to keep our hospital open and taking care of people who came through our doors regardless of their ability to pay for care. We committed to making every effort not to furlough or lay-off employees. It's important to keep your staff engaged and make sure you are focused on keeping staff and patients safe. This came at a significant cost to ACH financially, but it was the right thing to do for our employees and our community.