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Dear Members of the Racker Community,

It has been several months since my last letter, and it is time for an update. Since writing my last letter, many things have happened at Racker. Most of what I have been working on has been directly related to the Covid 19 (C19) pandemic. We have learned a lot over the past several months and there will be much more to learn as we move forward. As you can imagine, I have received a lot of questions, some of which have been straight forward, and some of which have been much more complicated. Several questions continue to be asked and I will address those now.

THIS IS NOT GOING AWAY

When I met with Dan, Cris, and Nancy Malina in February, I told them a few things that were not generally accepted at the time. I said that C19 would be a pandemic. This was well before either the CDC or WHO said so. I said that it would blossom in the US regardless of what measures would be taken, that it would not be going away within a year, and that once robust testing was both available and deployed, we would find out that C19 is much less deadly than what was being discussed at the time. I also suggested that the response to C19 would cover the full spectrum of emotions, one extreme being "this is no big deal" and the other being "OMG, this is going to kill us all." My take on things was not because I had a crystal ball or some brilliant insights. Instead, it was relying on being a physician for over 30 years, being thoughtful about what I have seen over many years with public health issues, having an understanding of epidemiology, and an ability to read scientific studies myself and process statistical data, rather than relying on others to tell me what to think. My comments that follow are from spending a great deal of time researching everything I can get my eyes and ears on. A lot of what I have learned has come from studying what has taken place in other countries, what measures were taken in different places, and what the outcomes have looked like.

We have learned that C19 is a big deal and that, no, it is not going to kill us all. We have learned that a significant percentage of those who contract it will have no symptoms at all, and that another significant percentage will have mild to moderate symptoms. We have learned that the most vulnerable to mortality from C19 are the elderly and those with co-morbidities such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory diseases, kidney disease, etc., and especially a combination of any or all of the above. Since many of the people we support, especially adults, have 4 or more chronic and progressive illnesses, we immediately took action to protect them to the best of our abilities. So far, that has worked well.

We have also learned that children do quite well for reasons we don't yet fully understand. This is not to say that children cannot contract C19, but that they tend to recover more quickly than adults and that they tend to spread C19 less efficiently than adults. The moment our preschools closed, we began working on how to reopen. The amount of work done by our leaders and team members has been gargantuan. When NYS legislators told us we had the option to reopen this summer, we already had plans in place. I believe we have the most robust and practical plans in place that we can, and I am confident that we have a good handle on things. We also ready for the September reopening, we have plans in place, and for sure, they will change as we get new information.

MASKS WORK, BUT ONLY IF EVERYONE WEARS THEM

There still continues to be some confusion over masks. Some do not believe it is worth wearing them, thinking they do not work. Others believe that wearing a mask will fully and completely protect them from contracting C19. Neither assumption is true. First, I will talk about cloth masks and surgical masks (one category) and then I will talk about N95 and KN95 masks (a different category). Here is what is true about masks.

Cloth and surgical masks DO work. We have actually known this since the 1920's when surgeons and nurses started wearing them in the operating room to protect patients from infections. They act as a baffle between your mouth and nose and the outside world. They protect others from you when you wear one. This is not controversial and it has been studied extensively. The concept is this: MY mask protects YOU, YOUR mask protects ME. Since so many people who have C19 are asymptomatic, it is important for you to wear a mask to protect those around you, because you might have it and not yet know you have it.

N95/KN95 masks work differently. They are filters. While they do what I described above - acting as a baffle - their design also keeps aerosolized particles outside or trapped in the material in the mask. These are to be worn by people who are in the presence of someone who has C19 or is suspected of having C19. For the most part, these are worn by medical personnel on the front lines when working in places like emergency rooms, ICU's, special medical units, and first responders like EMT's. They are more cumbersome to wear and more uncomfortable than cloth or surgical masks. But they are effective in filtering out aerosolized particles and droplets. These protect the wearer, so think "My mask protects me AND you" when wearing an N95 or KN95 mask.

WHY THERE IS SO MUCH CONFUSION ABOUT EVERYTHING RELATED TO C19

There are many reasons so many are confused. First, there are so many conflicting directives from different agencies, both domestic and foreign. Second, too many people are relying on social media (a disease in itself, if you ask me) for their information. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, along with Google and Microsoft news feeds seem to be popular sources for what people are consuming as news. Just because your sister's friend's second cousin posts something about C19 on Instagram does not make it true. Third, main stream media is driven by dollars, not accuracy. They make more money when people read an article with a provocative headline. So, they make all of their headlines provocative. It is hard to avoid clicking on an article that says "Covid 19 Cases Continue To Rise!" Of course the cases continue to rise. They will continue to rise for quite some time. That is not what is important. What is important is the rate of hospitalization and the rate of morbidity as the case numbers continue to rise. Looking at Tompkins County for example, there have been very, very few hospitalizations and no deaths from C19 since April, and those two deaths were an elderly husband and wife that were transported to CMC from NYC, already extremely ill. Finally, the whole C19 issue is being highly politicized. That is human nature. I hope you will trust me when I say that none of my opinions or positions on C19 and what we should be doing at Racker has anything to do with politics. My perspectives are based on science, common sense, and practicality.

INSPIRATION

It is hard to feel inspired these days. For me, however, it is easy to feel inspired when I think about the people I work with at Racker. Every conversation I have with Dan and Cris make me realize that I get to work with some of the best leaders I have had the pleasure to experience over several decades. Every conversation I have with Cathe Oberlander, our Residential Healthcare Director/Admissions, and Katie Boardman, our Director of Residential, make me realize that the folks I worry about the most - the residents in our group homes - are in very good hands. Just today, I had an hour long conversation with Anne Schneider, the Director of Therapy Services about C19 and the real challenges our therapists face both in our classrooms and out in the community. She inspired me and made me feel grateful to be in a position to "decode" some of the vexing medical issues we all face regarding C19 as she offers great leadership, as well. Each of the people I mentioned above have shown me work that is in the interest of others, not in their own interest. That is what great leadership is about, and why I feel inspired as your Medical Director.

Summary Points:

1. Covid 19 is not going away any time soon, but proper social distancing, use of PPE, and hand washing are effective measures to decrease the likelihood of getting infected or infecting others. We have seen the effectiveness of these measures at Racker.
2. Masks DO work if worn properly. Wear your mask to protect others, and have others wear their mask to protect you.
3. If you are confused about issues related to Covid 19, look to credible scientists for answers. The Department of Health is also a reliable source for information and guidance.

So, while we have a way for all of our Racker Community members to send anonymous questions and C19 and/or everything else, I would be happy to receive questions or concerns about medical issues directly. Just email me at jeffl@racker.org

Stay healthy, stay strong, and thank you for the great work you are doing at and for Racker,
Jeff

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