Celebration and Lament: Recognizing Our Staff, Remembering Our Patients

Heartfelt gratitude and musical interludes marked an event to honor patients lost to COVID-19, celebrate those who survived, and recognize the remarkable efforts of physicians and staff.

The Rev. Matthew Rhodes, director of religious ministries, and Samuel Yenn-Batala, manager of pastoral care who also happens to be a talented saxophonist, provided poignant words and music to set the stage for an event held July 10 in the Healing Garden at Princeton Medical Center (PMC) honoring staff and patients affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Many faith traditions make a place for both lament and celebration, Rhodes noted, and that would give structure to the day’s gathering. He offered two observations about healthcare workers: First, they are predisposed to be better at tending to the wounds of others than acknowledging their own. Second, they are better at recognizing the efforts of their colleagues than accepting the praise they deserve.

“Spoiler alert, we’re not going to allow you to shrug off the deep gratitude that so many of us have for what you have done,” Rhodes told the Princeton Health staffers gathered in the Healing Garden. The guest speaker, Lisa Martucci-Thibault, built on that theme. She named every nurse, aide, physician, and staff member she could remember and thanked them for making her visits easier and helping to lessen her mother’s suffering. Her mother, Ruth Ann Martucci, was among the patients who died at Princeton Medical Center as a result of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19).

“While I consider it a gift to have been with my Mom during this awful journey, it hurt to watch her suffer,” Martucci-Thibault said. “Therefore I can’t imagine what it has been like for the caregivers, day after day, witnessing this suffering and knowing that many of their patients would not dance out of the hospital to Here Comes the Sun. But they did not stop coming to work and they never stopped caring. They kept at it, doing all they could to mitigate suffering and provide steady reassurance. That is heroism.”

The midpoint of the program featured a release of butterflies, a symbol of hope and new life. Rhodes followed by recounting a story about Philip Tran, RN, the stroke program coordinator at PMC. A former critical care nurse, Tran was among the many nurses, physicians, technicians, and other staff members who signed on to work in the CCU and PACU, caring for the most critically ill patients, at the start of the COVID-19 outbreak.

While working in the CCU, Tran bonded with the family of a particular patient — a first responder from New York City who had been infected on the job early in the pandemic. When the family made the difficult decision to have their loved one extubated, they were not allowed to be there in person. Tran set up an iPad to connect them virtually, and then, at the family’s request, he sat with the man until he took his last breaths.

“It was no small irony that Phil had risked his life to show up to care for this patient and others,” Rhodes said. “Many of you have risked your life caring for complete strangers as well.”

Later, Martucci-Thibault shared the story of her mother’s final days at PMC. "Even when I was the only visitor in the entire hospital — as most visits were prohibited during April — I never felt alone,” she said. “There was always someone there, from the nursing staff to security, providing caring eye contact, encouraging words and most importantly, a smile under their mask. In his novella, Bridge over San Luis Rey, Thornton Wilder wrote: ‘There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning.’ The compassion of this hospital’s staff was my bridge through loss to the start of healing. Thank you.”
PMC received 96 of a possible 100 points, compared to average scores of 80 among New Jersey hospitals and 79 nationally.

Ellen Winkle, RN, interim professional development specialist of nursing resources, said the mPINC survey results are the product of a team effort involving nurses, lactation consultants from the hospital staff and Princeton Health Community Wellness, and obstetric and pediatric providers who are committed to a model of care that promotes and supports breastfeeding.

“Success is always collaborative,” Winkle said. She also credited hospital policies that promote morning in and skin-to-skin time at delivery and throughout mother and baby’s hospital stay, as well as a human donor milk program that has decreased the use of formula in the neonatal intensive care unit.

In the years since the survey, Winkle said, the hospital built on its performance by updating policies to conduct newborn baths in patient rooms, instead of the nursery, and delaying baths so they don’t interfere with breastfeeding attempts.

Bernadette Flynn-Kelton, RN, an internationally board certified lactation consultant with Community Wellness, said Princeton Health offers comprehensive education and support for expecting parents, including prenatal breastfeeding instruction, prenatal phone consultations, and a pregnancy support group that helps prepare parents for what to expect during labor, delivery, and their postpartum hospital stay.

Community Wellness also provides discharge and bath classes every weekday for new parents, a virtual postpartum support group that meets via videoconference weekly, and twice weekly in-person breastfeeding support groups. Discharged families also receive courtesy calls from Community Wellness nurses and lactation consultants and can call a warmline for lactation questions.

BREASTFEEDING, INFANT CARE
POLICIES AT PMC
EARN HIGH MARKS FROM CDC

Princeton Medical Center (PMC) aced a federal infant care and nutrition survey on the strength of policies and practices that promote breastfeeding, advance maternity nursing skills, and ensure prenatal and postpartum education and support for mothers.

The survey — Maternity Practices in Infant Nutrition and Care, or mPINC — is conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to evaluate maternity care at hospitals nationwide. Results of the most recent survey, completed in 2018, were released to participating hospitals in June.

Added Precaution:
TEMPERED GLASS
INSTALLATION UNDERWAY

Every in-person registration or check-in desk across Princeton Health will soon have 3/8-inch-thick tempered glass panels as part of a project that is expected to be completed within the next several weeks.

Barriers have been installed at about 20 places on the hospital campus alone. The project also entails installations at more than 40 other sites, including surgery centers, the Breast Health Center, and Princeton Medicine, Princeton Rehabilitation, and Occupational Health offices.

In a memo to staff, Barry S. Rabner, president and CEO, and Steven R. Bergmann, MD, PhD, senior vice president for medical affairs, emphasized that the barriers are intended to supplement — not replace — safeguards such as the universal masking policy and eye protection requirements for all staff members and providers who have direct contact with patients and visitors.

Those policies and social distancing guidelines remain in effect.

Princeton Health also continues to handle many registration tasks online or on the phone to help limit face-to-face contact when patients arrive to check in for treatment or services.

PMC Recognized
Again as a
BEST REGIONAL HOSPITAL

For the sixth year in a row, Princeton Medical Center (PMC) was recognized as a Best Regional Hospital in central New Jersey and ranked among the top hospitals statewide and across the New York metropolitan area by U.S. News & World Report.

The magazine’s 2020–21 Best Hospitals ratings, published online July 28, named PMC as the No. 9 hospital in New Jersey and No. 24 in the metropolitan region. PMC also was rated high performing in one specialty — orthopedics — and three common procedures or conditions: hip replacement, knee replacement, and heart failure.

The ratings are based largely on data related to clinical outcomes and patient safety, as well as patient satisfaction surveys and indicators such as whether a hospital holds Magnet® status, the highest institutional recognition available for nursing excellence.

“Ratings like this reflect the high-quality, compassionate care that our physicians and staff provide every day,” said Barry S. Rabner, president and CEO of Penn Medicine Princeton Health. “We view this as a total team effort. Providers and employees throughout Princeton Health support the care provided at the hospital, and we all share in this recognition.”

To learn more about the hospital ratings, visit health.usnews.com.

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