What Happened When the Only ER Doctor in a Rural Town Got COVID

The impact of Kurt Papenfus', MD, absence stretches across Colorado's Eastern Plains.

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Kurt Papenfus, a doctor in Cheyenne Wells, Colorado, started to feel sick around Halloween. He developed a scary cough, intestinal symptoms and a headache. In the midst of a pandemic, the news that he had COVID-19 wasn't surprising, but Papenfus' illness would have repercussions far beyond his own health.

Papenfus is the lone full-time emergency room doctor in the town of 900, not far from the Kansas line.

"I'm chief of staff and medical director of everything at Keefe Memorial Hospital currently in Cheyenne County, Colorado," he said.

With Papenfus sick, the hospital scrambled to find a replacement. As coronavirus cases in rural Colorado, and the state's Eastern Plains especially, surge to unprecedented levels, Papenfus' illness is a test case for how the pandemic affects the fragile rural health care system.

"He is the main guy. And it is a very large challenge," said Stella Worley, CEO of the hospital.

If she couldn't find someone to fill in while he was sick, Worley might have to divert trauma and emergency patients nearly 40 miles north to Burlington.

"Time is life sometimes," she said. "And that is not something you ever want to do."

'The 'Rona Beast Is a Very Nasty Beast'

As deaths from the coronavirus have surpassed 250,000 in the U.S., new data show the pandemic has been particularly lethal in rural areas — it's taking lives in those areas at a rate reportedly nearly 3.5 times higher than in metropolitan communities.

About 63 people in Cheyenne County have been diagnosed with COVID-19, most of them in the past three weeks.

Papenfus, a lively 63-year-old, was discharged after a nine-day stay at St. Joseph's Hospital in

Denver, and he was eager to sound the alarm about the disease he calls the ‘rona.

“The ‘rona beast is a very nasty beast, and it is not fun. It has a very mean temper. It loves a fight, and it loves to keep coming after you,” Papenfus said.

He isn’t sure where he picked it up but thinks it might have been on a trip east in October. He said he was meticulous on the plane, sitting in the front, last on, first off. But on landing at Denver International Airport, Papenfus boarded the crowded train to the terminal, and soon alarm bells went off in his head.

“There are people literally like inches from me, and we’re all crammed like sardines in this train,” Papenfus said. “And I’m going, ‘Oh, my God, I am in a superspreader event right now.’”

An airport spokeswoman declined to comment about Papenfus’ experience.

A week later, the symptoms hit. He tested positive and decided to drive himself the three hours to the hospital in Denver. “I’m not going to let anybody get in this car with me and get COVID, because I don’t want to give anybody the ‘rona,” he said. County sheriff’s deputies followed his car to ensure he made it.

Once in the hospital, chest X-rays revealed he’d developed pneumonia.

“Dude, I didn’t get a tap on the shoulder by ‘rona, I got a big viral load,” he texted a reporter, sending images of his chest scans that show large, opaque, white areas of his lung. Just a week earlier, his chest X-ray was normal, he said.

Back in Cheyenne Wells, Christine Connolly, MD, picked up some of Papenfus’ shifts, although she had to drive 10 hours each way from Fort Worth, Texas, to do it. She said the hospital staff is spread thin already.

“It’s not just the doctors; it’s the nurses, you know. It’s hard to get spare nurses,” she said. “There’s not a lot of spares of anything out that far.”

Besides himself, six other employees — out of a staff of 62 at Keefe Memorial — also recently got a positive test, Papenfus said.

Hospitals on the Plains often send their sickest patients to bigger hospitals in Denver and Colorado Springs. But with so many people around the region getting sick, Connolly is getting worried hospitals could be overwhelmed. Health care leaders created a new command system to transfer patients around the state to make more room, but Connolly said there is a limit.

“It’s dangerous when the hospitals in the cities fill up, and when it becomes a problem for us to send out,” she said.

‘Bank Robbers Wear Masks Out There’

The impact of Papenfus' absence stretches across Colorado's Eastern Plains. He usually worked shifts an hour to the northwest, at Lincoln Community Hospital in Hugo. Its CEO, Kevin Stansbury, said the town mostly dodged the spring surge and his facility could take in recovering COVID patients from Colorado's cities. Now, Stansbury said, the virus is reaching places such as Lincoln County, population 5,700. It has had 144 cases, according to state data, and neighboring Kit Carson has had 301. Crowley County to the south, home to a privately managed state prison, has had 1,239 cases. It is far and away the No. 1 most affected county per capita in the state.

"So those numbers are huge," Stansbury said. He said that as of mid-November about a half-dozen hospital staffers had tested positive for the virus; they think that outbreak is unrelated to Papenfus' case.

Lincoln Community Hospital is ready once again to take recovering patients. Finances in rural health care are always tight, and accepting new patients would help.

"We have the staff to do that, so long as my staff doesn't get ravaged with the disease," Stansbury said.

Rural communities are particularly vulnerable. Residents tend to suffer from underlying health conditions that can make COVID-19 more severe, including high rates of cigarette smoking, high blood pressure and obesity. And Brock Slabach of the National Rural Health Association said 61% of rural hospitals do not have an intensive care unit.

"This is an unprecedented situation that we find ourselves in right now," Slabach said. "I don't think that in our lifetimes we've seen anything like what is developing in terms of surge capacity."

A couple of hours east of Cheyenne Wells, COVID-19 recently hit Gove County, Kansas, hard.

The county's emergency management director, the local hospital CEO and more than 50 medical staff members tested positive. In a nursing home, most of the more than 30 residents caught the virus; six have died since late September, according to The Associated Press. A county sheriff ended up in a hospital more than an hour from home, fighting to breathe, because of the lack of space at the local medical center.

Papenfus fretted about his home county and its odds of fighting off the virus.

"The western prairie isn't mask country," he said. "People don't wear masks out there; bank robbers wear masks out there." He is urging Coloradans to stay vigilant, calling the virus an existential threat. "It's a huge wake-up call."

Since being released from the hospital, Papenfus has had a rocky recovery. His wife, Joanne, drove him back to Cheyenne Wells, wearing an N95 mask and gloves, while he rode in the back on oxygen, coughing through the three-hour drive.

Once back at home after that initial nine-day stay, Papenfus hunkered down, with the occasional

trip outside to hang out with his pet falcon.

But a week after going home, he started having nightly fevers. He had a CT scan done at Keefe Memorial, the hospital where he works. It revealed pneumonia in his lungs, so he went back to Denver, getting readmitted at St. Joseph's Hospital. This time, Papenfus arrived via ambulance.

Finding a replacement for Papenfus at Keefe has been hard. The hospital is working with services that provide substitute physicians, but these days, with the coronavirus roaring across the country, the competition is fierce.

"They're really scrambling to get coverage," Papenfus texted from his hospital bed. "Whole county can't wait for my return but this illness has really taken me down."

He said he was now at Day 35 from his first symptoms, lying in his hospital bed in Denver, "wondering when I'll ever get back." Papenfus noted that COVID-19 has affected his critical thinking and that he will need to be cleared cognitively to return to work. He said he knows he won't have the physical stamina to get back to full duty "for a while, if ever."

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