

LeBenger: How COVID-19 will be game-changer in health-care delivery

Summit Medical Group head warns the virus will be here for a while – and lead to far greater use of telehealth

By **Tom Bergeron**
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File photo

Dr. Jeff LeBenger, chair and CEO of Summit Medical Group.

Summit Medical Group Chair and CEO Jeff LeBenger said SMG was ready for the COVID-19 outbreak.

“We knew that this was coming,” he said. “We knew that this was going to get worse, so we prepared ourselves from Day One, where we had a procurement office start researching and looking for (Personal Protective Equipment) as well as test kits for the COVID-19 virus.”

Because of that, LeBenger said SMG has had enough PPEs – it’s sharing with those in need – and quickly put in safeguards for patients and plans to help overtaxed hospitals.

LeBenger, however, wasn’t expecting such a massive shift to telehealth at both Summit Medical Group and **CityMD**, the urgent care centers that are now part of the group. It’s a shift, however, he’s glad to see.

“I think this jump-started virtual health care,” he said. “Right now, because people don’t want to come in and they shouldn’t come in, we are doing a lot of virtual visits.

LeBenger estimates SMG and CityMD are doing approximately 3,000 virtual visits a day. This, from an organization that used to do nearly 10,000 in-person visits.

“So, I do feel that a lot of chronic care management on the patient side will be moving to virtual,” he said. “And I think this is a major game-changer in health care delivery.

“We’ll see what happens in the ensuing months – after the coronavirus dies down – how people change their model.”

LeBenger said “months” is the operative word. He thinks we’re a few weeks from the peak – and then reminds folks that there will be plenty of outbreak on the other side.

“We’ve looked at this over the past few weeks and we’ve felt that the leveling of the curve or the peak might come around the third week of April,” he said. “Now, that’s the peak. It has a downside. You’re still going to have a tremendous amount of COVID-19 cases after the peak, for at least a month.

“Remember, it’s a bell curve, so you have to be prepared. It’s not just all of a sudden, (we’re) at that peak, it’s done. This is going to last for about another three, four weeks after that peak.”

LeBenger spoke with ROI-NJ on Tuesday. The following is a question-and-answer recap, edited for content clarity.

ROI-NJ: Let’s start big picture. What have you done at Summit Medical Group to handle the COVID-19 outbreak?

Jeff LeBenger:

- We put up tents up for testing, so we screen all our patients coming through our major hubs (to) protect our other patients at the group;
- We moved all our oncology (patients) to our big 130,000-square-foot center in Florham Park so we could keep COVID-19 patients away;

- We immediately closed down our operating rooms to be able to service, if we have to, the hot local hospitals and the hospitals in New York City without ventilators;
- We only do essential cases now, as well as essential visits;
- We increased our virtual visits to almost 3,000 a day on the Summit Medical Group side and up to 500 or more on the CityMD side;
- We allow low-acuity ER visits to come to us instead of to the ERs in the hospital;

ROI: How are you working with the major hospital systems?

JL: I've spoken with Hackensack Meridian, RWJBarnabas and Atlantic, and we're working very closely with them. With Atlantic, it is now one team of critical care. So, our critical care doctors and theirs, our hospitalists and theirs, act as one team right now. A lot of non-emergency care is being directed to us on the CityMD side in the New York metropolitan area, as well as Summit, on the integrated side.

We can take care of belly pain, cardiac pain and the type of care, which, unfortunately, is not being treated, it's falling through the cracks in certain hospitals because they are so overwhelmed with COVID. So, we reached out and spoke at, we're trying to figure out a way where we can handle that sort of less high-acuity patient in our centers in the ambulatory side.

We also have been moving some essential surgeries from the hospital to our ambulatory surgery center, because their ORs are completely closed down except for in-hospital true emergencies. So, we're trying to offload and help the surrounding communities as best as we can with our integrated health care approach.

ROI: You said you had prepared early. How is Summit Medical Group on PPEs?

JL: We have enough PPE for at least another week, and we're getting more in right now. And, I think with the production that's geared up, I think PPE probably should be OK within a week to two.

But we have also reached out to other large groups and hospitals (and) we have given some of our PPE to them. We know they are in dire need and it's really important to keep our health care providers safe.

ROI: Let's talk about the peak. What is life going to be like then?

JL: You're going to see New York being just overwhelmed. I'm glad that they opened up these makeshift hospitals and they brought that large ship in to take care of non-COVID-19 patients and to help with what needs to be done to have good health care within the New York metropolitan area. Remember, these hospitals were almost 90% full and now, all of a sudden, you've got this mass overrun of COVID-19 patients.

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