

# Hospitals, health care reel from coronavirus

Losing profitable surgeries to coronavirus patients

By TOM MURPHY  
Associated Press

The global coronavirus pandemic has created a huge need for health care in the U.S., but it also is delivering a devastating financial blow to that sector.

COVID-19 worries have kept patients away from doctors' offices and forced the postponement and cancellation of non-urgent surgeries. The pandemic also has shut down large portions of the American economy, leaving many would-be patients without insurance or in a financial pinch that makes them curb spending.

All of this has forced hospitals, health systems and doctors to lay off staff, cut costs and hope a return to normal arrives soon.

"You couldn't ask for a worse situation, really," said Joe Antos, an economist with the American Enterprise Institute.

Health care provided the biggest drag on the U.S. economy in the first quarter. Spending on care fell at an annual rate of 18%, the largest drop for that sector among records going back to 1959.

Economists point to hospital systems, a key driver of the sector's performance, as a big reason behind the drag from COVID-19, which initially hit some parts of the sector more intensely than others.

The nation's largest hospital chain, HCA Healthcare, said its hospital-based outpatient surgery totals for last month were down about 70% through late April.

In many cases, hospitals that lose those profitable surgeries are gaining COVID-19 patients — and losing money on them. Those patients may require hospitals to expand intensive care units, spend more on infection control and stock up on gowns and masks, among other items.

The American Hospital Association estimated in a recent report that the nation's hospitals and health systems will collectively lose more than \$36 billion from March to June treating hospitalized COVID-19 patients.

When adding factors like lost revenue from postponed surgeries, the total balloons to more than \$200 billion, said the association. Congress has set aside about \$175 billion so far to help hospitals and other care providers, but the hospital association says more assistance is needed.

"We're facing perhaps the biggest financial crisis in our history," association CEO and president Rick Pollack said.

From the doctor's office, the view also is bleak.

Dr. Seemal Desai said patient visits for his Dallas-area dermatology practice plunged about 85% after COVID-19 hit.

He started seeing patients over the internet with help from smartphone or tablet cameras. But that created fresh problems. Desai said some patients don't have the technology to do online visits. Others hesitate because they aren't sure their insurance



Tony Gutierrez/AP Photo

**Dermatologist Dr. Seemal Desai in the waiting room of his office in Texas. Desai said that at this time of day, early afternoon, his office would typically be filled with several patients.**

will cover them.

Only about half the patients who were offered a telemedicine visit actually did one.

"You would think my volume would be shooting through the roof and people would be clamoring for it, but it's completely the opposite," Desai said.

The dermatologist cut expenses, including marketing, and he's reduced some employee hours.

Nationally, the health care sector shed nearly 1.5 million jobs from February to April, or about 9% of its total, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

A big chunk of that came from dentist offices. Preliminary data shows that employee totals for that slice of the sector sank by more than 500,000, or 53%.

Overall economic growth, as measured by the gross domestic product, fell at an annual rate of 4.8% in the January-March quarter even though the severe impact of the virus was only felt in the last couple of weeks of March.

The current quarter is expected to be much worse. The Congressional Budget Office forecasts that the GDP will plunge 40%. That would be four times the largest drop on quarterly GDP records that go back to 1947.

Even so, health care researchers expect hospitals, doctor's offices and surgery centers to rebound gradually. But they're not sure yet how much patient volume will return.

People who have lost jobs and insurance coverage may not make doctor visits unless they absolutely have to.

The Kaiser Family Foundation recently estimated that nearly 27 million people — or about 8% of the U.S. population — could have become uninsured at least temporarily between March and early May due to the loss of employer-sponsored insurance.

It also may take a while for some patients to become confident that a hospital or doctor's office is safe enough to visit without catching COVID-19.

"People are just afraid to go to any medical setting right now," Antos said, noting that the economy also could face another

setback if infection rates spike again.

In Texas, Desai has pulled chairs out of his waiting rooms to increase social distancing for patients and staff. He's also asking other patients to wait in their cars until the exam room has been sanitized.

The dermatologist got some government assistance in the first round of payroll protection loans, and that will help him for a few more weeks.

But he's not expecting a quick rebound. It's hard to rebuild patient volume when only two people can be in the waiting room at the same time.

"After another month I honestly have no clue whether we will be able to remain open," he said.

Associated Press writers Martin Crutsinger, Josh Boak, Andrew Taylor, Linda A. Johnson and John Mone contributed to this report.

**'WE'RE FACING PERHAPS THE BIGGEST FINANCIAL CRISIS IN OUR HISTORY.'**

Rick Pollack | American Hospital Association CEO and president

## Some words of wisdom

**Dear Annie:** I am 81 years old and a longtime reader of your advice column. I thought the message below might be useful to you and your readers somehow. It is certainly authentic. I received it as a link to click on. I couldn't open it, but the sender, who is president of a local seniors group that has been keeping members entertained with all sorts of items in her daily email, kindly typed the text for me. It was Steve Job's final essay before dying a billionaire at age 56. — *Words of Wisdom*

"I reached the pinnacle of success in the business world. In some others' eyes, my life is the epitome of success. However, aside from work, I have little joy. In the end, my wealth is only a fact of life that I am accustomed to. At this moment, lying on my bed and recalling my life, I realize that all the recognition and wealth that I took so much pride in have faded and become meaningless in the face of my death.

"You can employ someone to drive the car for you, make money for you but you cannot have someone bear your sickness for you. Material things lost can be found or replaced. But there is one thing that can never be found when it's lost — life. Whichever stage in life you are in right now, with time, you will face the day when the curtain comes down.

"Treasure love for your family, love for your spouse, love for your friends. Treat yourself well and cherish yours. As we grow older, and hopefully wiser, we realize that a \$300 or a \$30 watch both tell the same time. You will realize that your true inner happiness does not come from the material things of this world. Whether you fly first class or economy, if the plane goes down — you go down with it.

"Therefore, I hope you realize, when you have mates, buddies and old friends, brothers and sisters, who you chat with, laugh with, talk with, have sing songs with, talk

about north-south-east-west or heaven and earth, that is true happiness! Don't educate your children to be rich. Educate them to be happy. So when they grow up they will

know the value of things and not the price. Eat your food as your medicine, otherwise you have to eat medicine as your food.

"The One who loves you will never leave you for another because, even if there are 100 reasons to give up, he or she will find a reason to hold on. There is a big difference between a human being and being human. Only a few really understand it. You are loved when you are born. You will be loved when you die. In between, you have to manage!

"The six best doctors in the world are sunlight, rest, exercise, diet, self-confidence and friends. Maintain them in all stages and enjoy a healthy life."

**Dear Words of Wisdom:** Thank you for passing these words along. Though it's been disproven that Steve Jobs wrote this, its message is still important. I love the idea that we are loved when we are born and when we die and the point is to maintain and return to love while we are here and now. Hold your family a little closer; cherish friends. Help those who are unable to help themselves, and always forgive yourself first so that you can forgive others. When we truly love ourselves, we are able to love one another.

Use this time of quarantine to fall in love with yourself again. Journal, garden, pick up a new hobby, run, walk, hike, sing, dance, laugh, eat healthy foods and keep in touch with your friends and family on a daily basis. Whatever brings you joy each day, do it.

And if you are too sad, tired or anxious to engage in one of those activities, then let yourself be sad, tired or anxious. Because it is when we allow our feelings to be felt fully that we can move past those feelings and begin to feel better. Thank you for this realization.

DEAR ANNIE



ANNIE LANE  
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Tell us your COVID stories



The Astorian is partnering with the Astoria Public Library to publish weekly audio stories of how residents in Clatsop County are experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic.

Share your story with us. Here's how:

1. Call 503-325-5590
2. Tell us your first and last name, age, area of residence, profession and the best way to reach you
3. Then tell us your story in 1-2 minutes on the recording

Your story will be included in a weekly audio digest published on The Astorian's website. The Astoria library will preserve the audio file in a local history archive accessible to library users.

We want to hear from everyone — essential workers in health care, food service, financial, cleaning, logging, fishing and construction, to business owners, care-center residents, educators, graduating high school and college seniors and those sheltering at home — on how you are experiencing the pandemic.

The Astorian and Astoria Library may follow up with some voicemails for news stories and extended interviews.

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