

Wellness Project Serves as Lifeline to Senior Adults During COVID-19 Pandemic

UC San Diego Health team develops program to connect with high-risk older patients sheltering in place, often alone

While many people are dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic by sheltering at home with family, some must cope alone. Daily tasks like grocery shopping or managing prescriptions can be challenging, but for populations most at risk, such as seniors over the age of 85, these necessities may be impossibly daunting.

Spurred by concern for seniors in San Diego, Dr. Parag Agnihotri, Chief Medical Officer at UC San Diego Health Population Health Services Organization, gathered a team to begin checking on patients, often by simply calling them to see how they were doing.

“With key, evidenced-based structured questions related to medications, social support, food on hand and ability to manage stress or anxiety during this time, our team began conducting phone calls to our high-risk senior patients,”

said Agnihotri. “The outreach included coordination with other departments, such as social work, nursing and pharmacy as needed, with urgent issues handled by an onsite nursing instructor who could bring in our Nurse Triage team or 911.”

The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Patients were able to refill needed prescriptions. They got help ordering groceries. Some just welcomed an opportunity to talk with someone.

Responding to a need

Called “The Wellness Project” the program began March 23 with a small team of quality care navigators and registered nurses conducting the calls. But the team soon realized the need for this kind of outreach was far greater than they had thought.



Nursing student conducting wellness checks via phone.

“We started the calls wanting to make sure our senior population currently sheltering in place at home had what they needed and knew we are here to help,” said Eileen Haley, a registered nurse who serves as director of Population Health at UC San Diego Health. “When we reviewed the results of the calls, we saw the value and realized we needed to expand upon our efforts.”



From right, Eileen Haley, Dr. Parag Agnihotri, and nursing student team.

In partnership with the Nursing Education department at UC San Diego, Haley and colleagues in the Wellness Project recruited students into the evidence-based program, which helps meet Board of Nursing requirements and provides clinical hours for students whose academic careers have been disrupted by the COVID-19 crisis.

By late April, three nursing schools and five 10-member teams of students were conducting daily calls from a central site, all safely distanced. The program has now expanded to

include Family Medicine residents as well. More than 600 patients have been contacted and worked with a team member.

“We are training nurses and physicians of the future, and helping them understand the impact of how medical, physical and social determinants factor into a person’s health and well-being,” said Haley. “We’re proud to play such a key role in helping provide health care to our patients at an individualized level.”

Virtual connection develops a social bond

A subset of the senior population in San Diego are considered high-risk with multiple medical, physical and social needs, especially those living alone with minimal social networks or support. The Wellness Project provides an opportunity for clinicians and students to listen, learn and help connect patients to their doctors, pharmacists or social workers. It also provides patients with the opportunity to just talk with someone about their concerns, fears or even what they may be making for dinner that day.

“One student recently connected with a scared and lonely patient who had not had any social contact by phone or in-person for more than two weeks,” said Agnihotri. “For an hour, this student shared CDC-recommended guidelines for health and safety, answered the patient’s questions and let her know that she cared.”

The program also provides nursing students with an opportunity to more deeply learn about UC San Diego Health's value-based care efforts, develop a greater understanding of COVID-19's impact on health care and use multiple technologies to reach out to patients sequestered at home.

"As the region's only academic medical center, and with our population health expertise, we see this as a valuable learning experience for students, our patients and our team," said Agnihotri. "We will continue this work, with the goal to expand to other learning opportunities that relate to population health and our community while we continue to face the COVID-19 crisis."

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