

HEALTH MATTERS: Respiratory therapists provide diverse and critical service



Shyla Allers

BY SPECTRUM HEALTH

When we're healthy, we all take breathing for granted. Normally, breathing is like blinking: We don't even have to think about it.

But unfortunately, lung disease and breathing difficulties are common. That's why hospitals have a team of respiratory therapists available to treat patients of all ages, from newborns through geriatrics.

We recognize respiratory therapists across the country this week during Respiratory Care Week Oct. 20-26.

Respiratory therapists, or "RTs" for short, are an integral part of the health care team at any hospital. They provide a variety of therapeutic and diagnostic services including critical functions such as resuscitation, providing and managing ventilators and non-invasive pressure

treatments in the intensive care unit, the emergency department and recovery.

They also provide care and assist with breathing support for premature infants and pediatric patients.

RTs administer inhaled therapy using aerosolized medication to help patients breathe easier by opening airways due to swelling and spasm and to help clear mucus from airways.

RTs often work with patients suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), asthma, pneumonia, sleep apnea and those with different types of pulmonary and heart failure. More than 16 million Americans have COPD.

RTs respond to all emergencies in the hospital including cardiac arrest and any trauma in the emergency department. The more critical the patient or situation, the more likely we'll

have a member of the respiratory care team at the patient's bedside contributing to the patients care.

Team members must have superb critical thinking skills and be quick on their feet.

In addition to inpatient treatment and therapy, RTs provide an array of outpatient procedures and tests as well.

RTs will often administer pulmonary function testing to measure lung capabilities to help diagnose breathing diseases. These tests allow physicians to prescribe an appropriate treatment plan unique to each patient.

Heart and lung function are often related, so tests that RTs provide or set up can include an electrocardiogram (EKG) and other heart monitoring devices such as holter monitors to measure heart activity. Another critical procedure RTs perform is arterial blood gas puncture and

analysis.

Respiratory care also works closely with the cardiac and pulmonary rehabilitation department that provides outpatient rehabilitation which includes individualized exercise, cardiopulmonary monitoring and education.

Education outreach programs include smoking cessation, asthma education and management and a better breathers support group. Call (231) 592-4204 for more information on these programs.

We're proud of the work our RTs perform every day. Breathe well!

Shyla Allers is manager of respiratory care services at Spectrum Health Big Rapids and Reed City hospitals. She's been with Spectrum Health seven years and oversees a staff of 24.



In this Oct. 9 photo, a mentally ill woman sits on the streets in Monrovia, Liberia. More than a decade after back-to-back civil wars ravaged Liberia its people still await justice for countless abuses, and many Liberians say the lack of accountability is worsening a mental health crisis. (AP Photo/Jonathan Paye-Layleh)

Post-war Liberians are demanding better mental health care

BY JONATHAN PAYE-LAYLEH

Associated Press

MONROVIA, Liberia (AP) — More than a decade after back-to-back civil wars ravaged Liberia its people still await justice for countless abuses, and many say the lack of accountability is worsening a mental health crisis.

The frustration soared when President George Weah recently indicated there was no need for his government to set up a war crimes court in the West African nation where the conflicts killed a quarter-million people. "Why now?" he repeated in an address to the United Nations annual gathering of world leaders last month.

The impatience with that attitude boiled over last month when hundreds of people stormed Liberia's legislature with a petition asking the government for more mental

health support. They said they represented some half-million people who have received mental health services over the years via a charity, the U.S.-based Carter Center.

Such private aid is not enough to assure that every Liberian receives assistance, they said.

"Mental health care continues to be seriously sidelined," said Bill Ballah, a spokesman for the group. "Each of us needs good mental health to ... pursue our life goals and meet our responsibilities as responsible citizens."

Critics say Liberia's president is not interested in creating a war crimes court because his political support base includes some elements who committed atrocities. Weah has rejected that accusation and his supporters dismiss it as untrue.

In addition to those suffering from trauma caused by the civil wars from 1989 to 2003, thou-

sands of Liberians are trying to recover from the world's deadliest Ebola outbreak that killed more than 4,000 people in the country from 2014-2016.

More than 20% of Liberia's post-war population has mental health issues including post-traumatic stress disorder, the World Health Organization said in 2016.

But the country has just a couple of psychiatrists for a population of nearly 5 million.

Until the arrival of a Nigerian psychiatrist three years ago, Dr. Benjamin Harris had been the only psychiatrist in Liberia for decades.

About 70% of students Harris interviewed near the end of the civil wars said they had seen people killed or tortured. About 60% said they had lost confidence in human beings and society.

"This can have a severe consequence on one's mental function," he told The Associated Press.

The need for mental health care in Liberia is so great and complicated that no government has been able to tackle the issue, and none has taken the initiative, Harris said.

Government authorities acknowledge the mental health problem is enormous but blame the country's inability

to raise enough revenue to address such issues.

The chairman of the senate committee on health and a former health minister, Dr. Peter Coleman, said the funding allotted to the health sector in the annual budget is negligible because there are competing priorities.

"When it comes to mental health right now, it's collaborations with agencies such as the Carter Center that is helping us to at least do the rudimentary things in mental health," he said.

Dr. David Henderson, chairman of the psychiatry department at Boston University's medical school, said mental health could be tackled more rigorously in places like Liberia if global health funding paid more attention to psychiatry. If those resources were provided, "we can really build capacity very quickly."

He cited the success story of Ethiopia, which went from just three psychiatrists to about 100 over 15 years.

For now Liberia has just one overcrowded and underfunded mental health hospital, an annex of the John F. Kennedy Memorial Medical Center in the capital, Monrovia. Patients are charged the equivalent of \$10 for 21 days of treatment, a cost many cannot afford.

UnitedHealth revenue up 7%, raises annual outlook

BY TOM MURPHY

AP Health Writer

UnitedHealth Group hiked its 2019 forecast again after the addition of hundreds of clinics to its health care services business contributed to a better-than-expected third quarter.

The nation's largest health insurance provider said Tuesday that it now expects full-year earnings of between \$14.90 and \$15 per share after previously raising its forecast in July.

Analysts expect earnings of \$14.83 per share, according to FactSet.

UnitedHealth Group Inc. provides health insurance for more than 49 million people but also has been expanding well beyond that focus through its Optum segment. In June, the company completed a \$5 billion deal to buy DaVita Medical Group clinics, as part of its push to move deeper into providing care.

Insurers say they are doing this to cut costs and make sure that people receive good care.

The company's OptumHealth revenue jumped 34% in the quarter to \$8.1 billion, also fueled by an expansion of behavioral health services.

UnitedHealth's Optum segment also runs one of the nation's largest pharmacy benefit management businesses and provides other services. Operating earnings from Optum jumped 20% in the quarter to \$2.4 billion.

Operating earnings from the company's health insurance side grew about 4% to \$2.7 billion.

Medical costs, by far the company's largest expense, grew 8% compared to last year's quarter and topped \$39 billion, but UnitedHealth said that trend remained within expectations.

Overall the insurer's earnings jumped 11% in the quarter to \$3.54 billion. Earnings, adjusted for one-time gains and costs, were \$3.88 per share, which is 8 cents better than Wall Street was expecting, according to Zacks Investment Research.

Total revenue grew about 7% to \$60.35 billion, also topping projections.

Shares of the Minnetonka, Minnesota, company climbed nearly 2% to \$224.53 in early trading. But the stock was down about 11% so far this year, as of Monday's close even though the Dow Jones industrial average — of which UnitedHealth is a component — has climbed nearly 15 percent.

Shares of insurers and pharmacy benefit managers have bounced around this year, as some Democratic presidential candidates have renewed a push for a "Medicare for All" plan that could replace private coverage and as Congressional committees investigated soaring drug costs.



This 2012 photo shows a portion of the UnitedHealth Group Inc.'s campus in Minnetonka, Minn. (AP Photo/Jim Mone, File)

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