**COVID-19: What First Responders Should Know**

Below are the answers to the questions I presented to Dr. Thomas Russo, the University of Buffalo Department of Medicine Professor and Chief Infectious Disease expert during our telephone interview.

**1. Volunteer First Responders Hanging Out:** I think all of us should practice social distancing and minimizing exposure to other individuals when unnecessary. I think what’s driving the virus, at least in part is that individuals can be asymptomatically infected and likely still transmit the virus to others up to three days and perhaps more before symptoms develop. So whenever a group of individuals puts themselves together in close quarters, they run a small risk of infecting each other.

**2. Career Firefighters in Close Quarters:** I think the strategy in those circumstances would be to try to maximize distance from other individuals. The other thing that I would really strongly recommend, and I know it’s not popular, is for people to wear masks. We know the virus is transmissible within that 6’ zone but maybe its transmissible particularly in a building with a closed air volume it may be transmissible at great distances. So if everyone wears masks that’s another layer of protection in addition to social distancing. We know that there is a small chance that respiratory secretions, spit or saliva can get on inanimate objects or high touch surfaces as well such as door handles, the bathroom, things like that. Good hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfecting high touch surfaces within the firehouse would be a good strategy to minimize risk.

**3. Greatest Level of Respiratory Protection:** N-95 is the preferred mask, KN-95 which are made primarily in China are probably equivalent to N-95 but the standards aren’t quite as rigorous. The next level of protection is the surgical mask which are pre-fabricated and then the bottom level if your unable to access any of the other masks is a homemade cloth mask. If you use a homemade cloth mask you want to use the densest highest thread count material possible. If you can hold the material up to the light and can see through it, it’s probably not very good at all. Even a poor porous cloth mask is better than nothing. I think it’s important to point out that if you have a beard, regardless of the type of mask, they kind of push out the mask to create a side space that will let contaminants in. If you have a beard all of these mask options become relatively imperfect.

**4. EMS Runs with Negative COVID-19 symptoms:** I would wear the mask, especially when we have a lot of infections in the community. People can be asymptomatic in that 2-3 day window before they develop symptoms and become infectious. Just because a patient doesn’t have symptoms that doesn’t mean that firefighters aren’t at risk. I would assume that everyone is potentially infectious, that would be the safest course of action.

**5. EMS Runs with Positive COVID-19 symptoms:** A mask and face shield is ideal; they would be my number one and two choices. If you’re going to be in direct contact with patients gloves and a gown would be nice to have. If you don’t have gloves but maintain good hand hygiene that will still work. If you don’t have a gown and you come in contact with a suspected patient you could contaminate your clothes or fire gear, then touch your eyes, nose, or mouth and potentially get infected. If you’re going to prioritize PPE, I would say mask, face shield, gown and then gloves.

**6. Sanitizing Equipment & Vehicles:** Bleach is readily available and will get the job done. You can put it into squirt bottles for ease of use (1/3rd of a cup of bleach per gallon of water). Also, Lysol wipes will work but may be hard to come by. Lastly, any sort of cleaning solution that is alcohol based that’s 60-70% is good as well.

**7. Training/Gym Use:** I don’t know that I would stop doing critical type drills or activities Doing so would far exceed the risks of the congregating firefighters. I think if you’re conducting drills in conjunction with good protective measures and social distancing, I think the benefit would out weight the risk. What I would be less excited about is a bunch of guys getting together to work out, which is important, I would suggest you do that at home where it’s safer and people aren’t congregating.

**8. Limiting Patient Contact:** I would say this is the call of whoever is in charge of the individual response. I would use the minimum individuals necessary to get the job done in an optimal fashion.

**9. Having COVID-19 Symptoms Personally:** Presently, the course of action if you think you’ve contracted COVID-19 is to stay home, however you should reach out to your health care provider and explain your symptom complex. The critical symptoms to monitor closely are shortness of breath, lightheadedness, or dizziness. Some individuals will get gastrointestinal symptoms or dehydrated from high fevers. In the absence of the critical warning signs if you’re just having a cough, fever, not feeling too bad, a headache, loss of taste or smell, vomiting, diarrhea it’s best to isolate at home and try and ride it out.

**10. First Responder Testing:** If you are a Health Care Worker or First Responder experiencing the critical symptoms and feel you should be tested for COVID-19 the newly established testing site at Walmart on Walden Avenue in Cheektowaga will provide testing you. Your Fire Chief should be able to provide you with a link or email attachment that you can follow to get scheduled for a test.