

Rural Surgery Report

Recent years have seen a steady increase in the number of closures of rural hospitals, and the current COVID-19 crisis is likely to accelerate that trend. The cancellation of elective procedures across the nation in March and April has pushed small hospitals, which lack the cash reserves of their bigger cousins, to the financial brink. According to researchers at UNC, at least 170 rural hospitals have shut down since 2005, with 19 of these closing last year. Many of the rural areas served by these hospitals have large elderly populations and patients with high rates of comorbidities such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and obesity. Rural communities also tend to have higher rates of uninsured patients, further adding to financial stress for rural hospitals.

So far in 2020, Bluefield Regional Medical Center, just over the state line in the West Virginia portion of the town, shut down its OB/GYN and Surgical Services last month. The hospital had been purchased by the neighboring Princeton Community Hospital last fall and was probably slated for consolidation and eventual conversion to a long-term care facility. The coronavirus pandemic likely just hastened the process.

To the southwest, surgery was also curtailed at Mountain View Hospital in Norton, Wise County in late 2018, a move also prompted by consolidation to achieve efficiency and cost savings. Lee County Hospital closed in 2013 when it was part of the Wellmont Health System. Reopened as an urgent care facility last October, it was slated to be upgraded to a freestanding ER by Ballad Health this year, with eventual plans to reopen the entire hospital. Finally, Pioneer Community Hospital in Stuart, Patrick County, closed its doors in September, 2017. Although Gov. Northam signed emergency legislation intended to facilitate reopening of the hospital in early 2018, local community leaders have abandoned hopes of reviving it.

In summary, by eliminating elective surgery for two months and curtailing hospital admissions in general, the coronavirus pandemic has eroded already narrow profit margins for hospitals of all sizes, but particularly for smaller rural hospitals which heavily depend on their surgical services to balance their bottom line. The remainder of 2020 and 2021 may see additional compromise of access to rural surgical care as additional rural hospitals curtail surgical services through consolidation or close altogether.