

Introduction

During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and face masks were mandated to ensure safety of the general population. According to the CDC, the risk for severe illness increases with age, making the elderly most vulnerable. In the U.S., 80% of deaths associated with COVID-19 were adults 65 years or older. Social isolation is a public health emergency that was already evident in the geriatric population, now exacerbated due to effects from the pandemic.

Background

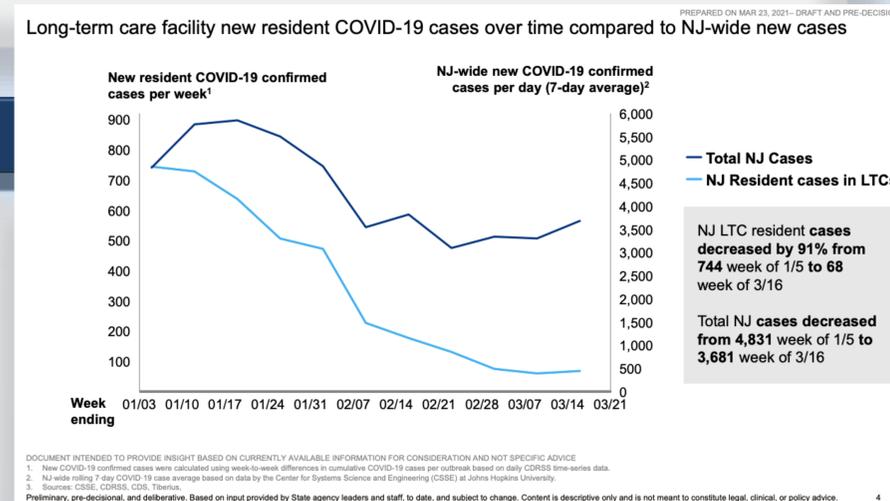
- Studies have shown social isolation in the elderly may result in a physical stress response, increased inflammation and an impaired immune system
- Elevated pro-inflammatory markers, such as IL-6, CRP, fibrinogen
- Lack of physical activity also leads to increased arterial stiffness, cardiac atrophy and dysfunction and increased oxidative stress and inflammation.
- Social isolation is associated with a significantly increased risk of premature mortality of all causes based on research studies spanning over 40 years.
- From a mental standpoint, there are higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

Objectives/Proposed role

- Objective: improve quality of life of patients in long-term care facilities
- Family medicine residents and students can engage in weekly wellness rounds
- Utilize the Geriatric Depression Score to further assess response

Methods

- Volunteers participated in ‘Sunshine calls’ consisting of 15-20 minutes conversation with a resident regarding their hobbies.
- ‘Freedom rides’
- It’s Never Too Late (IN2L) tablets, user friendly for the elderly which allowed for communication between family members and telehealth visits for healthcare providers
- Visitation Stations with plexiglass screens were arranged to allow “in-person” visits from family members, and thoroughly disinfected after each encounter.
- From January 2021 until present day, there has been a significant decline in the number of new NJ-wide LTC COVID-19 cases.
- Covid Activity Level Index score was calculated and new guidelines for visitation were executed based on the risk of new COVID cases within each region.



COVID-19 Cases in LTC facilities compared to state-wide cases



Visitation Station at the Manor in Freehold, NJ

Discussion

- Geriatric patients are most at risk for severe COVID-19 infection but it is also imperative to find a balance while physically distancing in order to prevent adverse effects of social isolation
- The Covid Activity Level Index was utilized as a parameter to lessen restrictions
- Patients were visibly more energetic and happy with these interventions, likely impacting physical health as well
- Barriers to care include technology, use of face masks/shields (patients who are hard of hearing cannot read lips), lack of physical touch/connection

Future Considerations

- Patient satisfaction surveys – including questions on physical symptoms, mood, appetite, sleep
- Family satisfaction surveys for comprehensive care