

JENNIFER McCONNELL, MD '94

Stepping Up

Car accidents, sports field concussions, heart attacks, insulin spikes. Whenever someone has a medical emergency in a grocery store, on a plane, on the road or during a sporting event, if Jennifer McConnell, MD '94, is on the scene, she's often the first to offer help.

"It doesn't matter where she is, she's the first one to the rescue, to do whatever she can to help someone," said Dr. McConnell's daughter, Julie.

So it wasn't a surprise when McConnell told her family she wanted to work at the local coronavirus testing and screening tent.

McConnell's wife, Lori Smail, was concerned about the risk to McConnell and their family from a virus that has created a pandemic.

"The first question I asked Jenn was, 'How well will you be protected?'" said Smail, an elementary school principal.

McConnell reassured her wife and daughters that she would be fully protected with a motorized respiratory mask that filtered and cleaned air.

"Once I was confident that she was safe, I was 100-percent supportive," said Smail.

A physician for 26 years, McConnell worked as a family doctor for Maine General Health in Augusta, Maine, for years before opening her own practice with a partner. Known for her dry wit and unflappable character, McConnell is not shy about standing up for what she believes in—whether battling unfair insurance practices or fighting for educational support for her 18-year-old daughter, Sarah, who has autism.

So when her medical partner Lisa Clarcq, DO, heard that Maine General needed doctors to staff the coronavirus screening tent, McConnell and Clarcq immediately volunteered.

"We both jumped two feet in," McConnell said.

From mid-March to mid-April, McConnell and Clarcq rotated shifts, working every other day from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. A few of the patients McConnell evaluated had to be immediately hospitalized. Ten percent were sent to an emergency room for further evaluation.

"And some, about five percent, came back several days later, sicker, and needed to be admitted," McConnell said.

The Augusta screening and testing facility is one of about a half-dozen tents set up outside Maine hospitals.

"Our goal is to keep the less acute patients out of the ER, so the doctors, nurses and respiratory therapists can take care of the really sick patients," said McConnell.

Each day, after being cleared by security and the registration nurse, patients pull up to the COVID tent, where McConnell approaches their car. To protect herself and the patient, she wears a hospital gown, gloves and a PAPR — a motorized respiratory mask with a plastic shield.

"My first line to the person is always: 'Tell me your story,'" McConnell said. "So I get a sense of whether or not they have been sick or exposed to the virus."

McConnell asks about fever, sore throat, cough, what they do for work, if they or someone they know have traveled recently. She also tests the patient's temperature, heart rate, and oxygen level.

The big concern, McConnell said, is their oxygen levels.

"I tell them if they are so short of breath that they can't walk from their couch or their bed to the bathroom, that would be a reason to be very concerned, and to come back or call 911," she said.

Many of the patients McConnell treats and counsels are anxious and scared. Calming them is a priority, a skill she has honed.

Jessie Blake, a home healthcare nurse and one of McConnell's patients, recently came to the screening tent with a sore throat, cough and fever.

"Jenn told me to come get checked so I don't spread it to my patients," said Blake. "When she told me she was at the testing tent, I was so proud of her. She is a phenomenal human being, putting herself out there like that in this unprecedented time."

Though she is proud of her mother, McConnell's daughter Julie can't help but worry as Maine's coronavirus infections and deaths continue to spike. Along with working 12-hour shifts at the screening tent, her mother still cares for her private practice patients and offers medical care to people in recovery.

"What she is doing is really great," said Julie. "I try to stay positive, but that fear is there. She is at a much higher risk exposing herself."

But Julie understands that her mother cannot stand on the sidelines during a pandemic, a time when her community needs her.

"She would do anything to try and help make things better," Julie said. "She's definitely a hometown hero."

McConnell herself tries to tamp down her fears. She has stopped watching news reports about healthcare professionals who die from the virus. "This is a pandemic with so many questions and few answers," she said. "I don't know how long we're going to be fighting this."

—Barbara Walsh

This article originally appeared on PineTreeWatch.org. Adapted with permission.



Maine family doc Jennifer McConnell, MD '94, volunteers at a COVID-19 screening tent in Augusta.