

Jeff Bernhard:

Hi. I'm Jeff Bernhard, Senior Vice President of Commercial Markets at Highmark. Welcome to Hitting a Higher Mark. In this podcast we explore topics that are transforming how healthcare is delivered and paid for. Over the next few weeks we're launching a miniseries covering the topics surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. Today we will be specifically discussing how business owners can safely reopen their businesses while keeping their employees and customers safe.

Jeff Bernhard:

Today our special guest will be Dr. Susan Manzi, the Chair of the Medicine Institute at Allegheny Health Network. Welcome, and thank you for joining us. Now let's get started on today's topic. Dr. Manzi, first, as our country continues to transition out of the lockdown phase many businesses are concerned with how they will safely reopen and protect their employees. What are some of the things businesses need to think about prior to reopening?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

You know Jeff, this is a crazy time for everyone, unprecedented time, and so when I talk to businesses and a lot of them reach out, I have three guiding principles for them and then five very concrete recommendations. Let me start with the guiding principles. The first thing I say is, be patient. Right? This is not going away. Likely this will be going on for the next 18 months, possibly two years, who knows, until we get a vaccine. So calm down because nobody has all the answers, and it's not like you don't know and everybody else knows. It's that we collectively are learning, so be patient.

Dr. Susan Manzi:

The second is be flexible. Things are changing by the minute. You may have to make a quick decision, change what you're doing, move in a different direction. It's okay because as we learn and the science gets better, you'll get better at making good decisions, and people will be there to help you. Really importantly Jeff, communication, communication, communication. When Allegheny Health Network was in the very start of this pandemic, we were an essential business, we had to stay open, we had daily Zoom calls. We had 8:00 PM emails that went out on a regular cadence because when there's fear, when there's anxiety, you have to try to make calm out of that, and you cannot overcommunicate. Even if you're telling people, "We don't have the answer. Here's what we're going to do to get it." Get out there because with no information people think the worst.

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Those are my guiding principles, and then my five concrete recommendations. The first and most, most important is social and physical distancing. You have got to do that. I don't care what business you have, if you're able to get down to 25% capacity, can't always do that, that's a general guideline, that's a good thing to shoot for. You have to make sure if you have workforce that can stay home, let them stay home. Rotate people in and out. Keep desks moved apart. Try to reduce congregating in lunch rooms and conference rooms. You have to do that. You even have to have places on the floor for people to stand when they're waiting.

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Even elevators, the guidelines right now suggest that no more than four people in a standard elevator at any given time. And put signage, one-way traffic, whatever you need to do. Cannot emphasize that

enough. Second, and very importantly is personal protective equipment. You got to have mandated masking, and if people know how to use their mask ... They can't be under the nose. It has to be over the nose covering the mouth. Keep your masks on. Third is hand hygiene. We talk about that even in flu season, but you've got to have hand sanitizers everywhere. Pass them out to your employees. Put signage up. Make sure it's easy for them to wash their hands. The good news is this virus is pretty easy to kill with simple hand sanitizer and just soap and water, so that shouldn't be a problem.

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Fourth is ventilation. We don't talk about that a lot, but the CDC has great recommendations for HVAC systems. You know, keeping windows open, doors open. The last thing you want to do is turn a fan on in a closed room and keep circulating that stagnant air. You want air moving out. If you can be outdoors, that's terrific. Then finally, Jeff, know your employees. You're going to have high-risk employees for whatever reason. They're pregnant. They have other immune-suppressive conditions or comorbidities. Try to find other ways of redeploying them or keeping them at home, because you have to know who you're working with.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Manzi, that's great advice. You know, for those that were not a part of our webinar, you also did an outstanding job with your team talking about how the school districts reopen, and athletes, and hopefully we can post that in the description. If people listening to this are opening a school district, but that's certainly a separate webinar, again we can put that. I was taking notes as you were discussing your advice, and it almost sounds like if you're a marriage counselor as it relates to what to do during the pandemic. Be patient, be flexible, and be good with communications. The next question is, if someone runs a business that's open to the public, such as a restaurant or a retail store, what are some measures they should take to ensure safety for the customers that come into the store, or frequent the store or restaurant, and the employees that work there?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

I think cleaning and disinfecting becomes important. It's important because of the virus, but it's also important for your clients and your employees to see you doing because you want to make sure people know you're serious about this, and you're doing something about it. In terms of your employees, we are big fans of daily symptom checking. You want to ask common symptoms of COVID virus. Have them do an attestation that they have none of those. I will tell you that temperature checks are controversial for a lot of reasons. Number one, if you line people up to get their temperatures checked you're congregating sometimes, which is not what you want to do.

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Secondly, they're not always accurate. They're only looking at surface temperature, not internal temperature, and if it's normal, people have this false sense of security. Right? I'm okay, and I don't have to follow the rules. So a little bit controversial about temperature checks and not something we would universally recommend. Knowing symptoms, and we'll talk about this further if you'd like, but you've got to make sure your employees know, if they're sick stay home. Put up signs saying what the common symptoms are, and again, educating your clients and your customers as well as your employees.

Jeff Bernhard:

Let's flip the switch and let's say I'm a consumer, or I'm a patron of a restaurant. I'm going into a restaurant. What things, as a consumer, should I look for if I'm anxious or nervous about the store being prepared. Are there certain signs or things that the state, or township, or borough require be posted to make me feel comfortable that my safety is in the restaurant's best interest?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Yeah. You know Jeff, I won't even walk into a business unless they're mandating masks. That's how strongly I feel about masks. Remember, masks are protecting other people from you. Right? If I'm walking around with my mask on and other people aren't, that's not helping me. So mandating masks, I always look for that sign. Secondly, when I'm in a business, I look for those marks on the floor. You know, you stand here. When it's your turn, you move here.

Dr. Susan Manzi:

So social distancing, masking, even in restaurants. I love outdoor seating. I think outdoors is a great place with much less transmission so I think outdoor whenever possible is great. In Pittsburgh that's limited of course, but I think it's important as well. I want to see people cleaning surfaces and being very attentive to that. I'll tell you right now, if somebody's serving me food and their mask is under their nose, forget it. Right? Proper placement of the masks is really important.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Manzi, let's say I'm an employer and I have 150 employees that work in my location. Let's say it's in manufacturing, and my employee has identified themselves as testing positive, or somebody in their family has tested positive, what do I do as your employer in that situation?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Great question Jeff. The first thing you want to do is make sure anyone that has tested positive goes into isolation. That's the term, isolation. They are home and they are not around anyone. Right? That isolation should be at least 10 days from onset of symptoms. Very important. If you have been exposed to somebody who has tested positive, exposure means less than six feet, greater than 15 minutes, and the CDC now says, "Regardless of whether you're wearing a mask." Listen to that again, right, less than six feet, more than 15 minutes, regardless of whether you're wearing masks. That seems kind of crazy. Right? That just goes to show you how important social distancing is. The mask isn't enough. Why do they say that?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Because you and I both know people don't wear masks appropriately, and you can't count on that. So if you've had that exposure, then you need to go home and quarantine for 14 days from the time you had your last contact with that COVID-positive patient, 14 days from the time of your last contact. By the way, Jeff, you cannot test your way out of that. You're three days in, and you want to get a test. It's negative and you want to come back. Absolutely not, because the incubation period of the virus can be up to 14 days. So you may have that virus there, and it just is not detectable for maybe 10, to 12, to 14 days so you have to quarantine for 14 days from that last contact. If you've done that, and you are asymptomatic, you can then return to work. You have to be very clear about when it's okay to return to work.

Jeff Bernhard:

Great. What are the things that an employer really needs to be firm about from a strategy perspective as these employees return to the workplace?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Jeff, I think their biggest struggle to me, the employers, is going to be getting everyone to march in the same direction because all it takes is a few careless people that can wreak havoc within any business or school. You know, my philosophy has been that you need to bring your employees in as ambassadors. You have to empower them to say something to someone who's not wearing their mask appropriately, to call out someone who isn't doing proper hand hygiene or sanitation, because if they don't help you, you can't do it as a boss alone. You have to bring ambassadors in to be your voices, your ears, your eyes across the board. It's for the safety and welfare of everyone. Also, reminding your employees that what they do outside of the workplace is equally, if not more important, than when they come in. So they've got to be just as vigilant whenever they're not at work as they are coming into work.

Jeff Bernhard:

Maybe one more question. Let's say children under 20, 21, and they'll be young adults I guess, tend to be asymptomatic and not show signs, but they can certainly be a carrier of the virus. So what's an employee or an employer to do because not all children are going to get tested, and not all children would show signs of that. So is there anything an employer can do for the dependents, or an employee can do to be aware that their children may have the virus even though they're not showing any signs?

Dr. Susan Manzi:

Yeah. Asymptomatic carriers are a problem, Jeff, for all of us. Right? Because when you think that children are common as asymptomatic carriers, but also people in their 20s and 30s because they're well, and they have what we call no-symptom COVID infection, posse symptom, which means maybe a little snuffle, or you could be pre-symptom. Right? Three days before you get symptoms, you could be walking around totally asymptomatic, you don't know you have this. Hence the importance of whenever possible doing the social distancing. Because you have to assume, regardless of symptoms, anyone around you could be infected. It's very hard with children at home. There's no way you're going to social distance from your children. You just can't do it. But when you come into work, you have to be even more vigilant about your masking and your social distancing to keep your other employees safe.

Jeff Bernhard:

Dr. Manzi, I want to thank you for joining me to discuss how businesses can keep their employees and customers safe as they reopen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which it looks like by all means will go into '21 and maybe some of '22. It's going to be around a while. I've worked in this industry a while, and I would say you're definitely one of the most articulate doctors that I've worked with. It's great having not just a great clinician as a doctor, but someone that can communicate in very lay terms what employers and employees should be looking out for.

Jeff Bernhard:

As we all learn to adjust in our new normal, it's important that we continue to stay vigilant to protect ourselves and our communities against this virus. By implementing the proper health and safety practices businesses are able to reopen and support their employees and their customers. I'm Jeff Bernhard with Dr. Susan Manzi, and thank you for listening to Hitting a Higher Mark.

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