Coronavirus prompts some rapid-fire innovation to protect front-line medical staff at Hershey Med

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Even a crisis like the coronavirus pandemic has an upside.

The folks at the Penn State College of Medicine, Penn State Health and a West Shore business found it through a vigorous burst of innovation and production that is likely to save some lives.

The scenario is this:

With the world’s medical supply chain in disarray because of the virus, officials at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center feared they would be caught short on protective face shields for medical personnel if and when the coronavirus hits the midstate in full force.

With that sense of urgency in mind, the experts at the College of Medicine’s Center for Medical Innovation teamed with its Surgical Innovation Group and set to work. Quickly.

Under guidance from Dr. Peter Dillon, chief clinical officer at Penn State Health, those innovators produced a prototype face shield that could be manufactured locally.

Thirty-six hours after the call for a design was issued, that brain-storming team had a prototype that was ready for production. Manufacture of the shields was taken on by Mechanicsburg-based Universal Protective Packaging Inc., whose CEO Tim Ritter is a Penn State grad and sits on the CMI advisory board.
Employees with Universal Protective Packaging assemble personal protective face shields in the Mechanicsburg company on Wednesday, March 25, 2020. The Center for Medical Innovation at Penn State College of Medicine worked with the College’s Surgical Innovation Group to develop the prototype.

The medical center just began taking delivery of 20,000 of those locally-designed and made shields.

And they are offering their design for use by any medical establishment that needs to follow the Penn State example of producing supplies locally.

“We knew the capability was there,” Dillon said, given the array of talented people available to perform the rapid-fire task. They turned the virus into a “rallying point” to create something that is “so inspiring,” he said.

“We’re going 100 miles a minute right now,” Dillon said. “It really has been a shot in the arm to be able to do these things.”

Kevin Harter, the associate dean for medical innovation at the College of Medicine, said the shield challenge was just one of about 20 problems the innovators are working to address at the behest of the front-line medical staff.
The speedy effort on the shields, which are one-use-only devices, came to fruition just in time, he said. “The first shipment arrived just before we ran out of supplies,” Harter said.

Those face shields will be vital, especially if the virus hits the midstate as hard as some medical models predict, Dillon said. “While we are fighting the virus now, we are just at the cusp of it,” he said. “Obviously, we hope it won’t hit here like it has in New York.”

That potential has people in and outside Penn State Health working hard, long and sometimes with their own resources to prepare, Dillon said.

Meanwhile, Harter said, there are those other problems, including devising different protective gear for clinical staff, that his innovators need to solve. “We’re just going to keep at it,” he said.

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