Here are 3 ways to keep Delaware safe from coronavirus (Opinion)

Megan McNamara Williams, Guest columnist Published 5:01 a.m. ET Feb. 26, 2020

As the spread of coronavirus worsens and fear of this new virus increases, it is important to remember how fortunate we are to have the resources, expertise and support that exist in Delaware.

Novel coronavirus cases exceed 80,000 worldwide, with more than 2700 deaths or a case fatality rate of 3.3%. Compare this with the 2003 figures for 8422 cases of SARS and a case fatality rate of 10%, and you can see why there is perhaps, some reason for optimism.

According to the CDC, this season the flu has already caused an estimated 19 million illnesses, 180,000 hospitalizations and 10,000 deaths in the U. S. alone.

Regardless of the threat, Delaware hospitals and our health system are well prepared to address and contain these types of outbreaks.

Since the early 1980s Delaware hospitals have led the way in infection prevention efforts in our state. They have worked diligently to ensure we are effectively and proactively addressing infection risks.
Threats like the coronavirus are ever occurring and will continue to arise. The key to keeping Delawareans healthy and caring for those afflicted is preparation, knowledge and communication.

So how do our hospitals do this?

Each of our Delaware healthcare systems has a team of doctors, nurses, laboratory scientists, pharmacists and other professionals, who are solely responsible for identifying and addressing infection risks.

The average hospital employee receives annual education devoted to infection prevention. Countless hours are spent practicing infection prevention techniques while caring for our patients every day.

Here is a list of just a few of the practices used by all of our Delaware hospitals on a daily basis to prevent infection and reduce your risk.

1. Hand hygiene. The simple act of washing your hands is one of the most impactful to prevent infection

2. Using aseptic (aka sterile) technique during all invasive procedures

3. Specialized training of triage staff. Nurses at the front of the emergency department are not only there to greet you, but to make sure you are not bringing any unwanted infections or contaminants into the hospital and putting other patients at risk.

4. Isolation procedures. When we identify someone with an infection, suspected infection or possible contaminant and we quickly put a mask on their face and whisk them away to a private room, you are seeing infection prevention at its best.

5. Antibiotic Stewardship. Stewardship is an ethic that embodies the responsible planning and management of resources. In the context of infection prevention, it refers to the phenomenon that overprescription of antibiotics allows bacteria to become drug-resistant.

Drug resistance diminishes the ability of treatments to effectively address the needs of patients with complex presentations. Antibiotic stewardship programs can improve patient safety and ensure the continued efficacy of antibiotics.

Every single hospital in Delaware has an antibiotic stewardship program and the results are impressive. We have reduced antibiotic prescription rates by over 25% — an
astounding result that means fewer adverse reactions and ultimately preserves our ability to effectively fight off infections when they occur.

All of these efforts are impressive and take masses of people, dedication and resources to work.

It is extremely important to note that our local hospitals have not been alone in these efforts, and key planning, programming and partnerships are an essential part of our statewide work to protect Delawareans from infection. We continuously collaborate in this arena with the Division of Public Health, Emergency Medical Services, the Delaware Emergency Management Agency and state epidemiologists.

As our hospitals devote staff, time and tremendous resources to these programs and services, it is important to note that through this work we have been able to reduce infection rates and the costs associated with them.

Since 2017 our Delaware hospitals participating in the Health Improvement and Innovation Network program have reduced infection-related costs by over $3 million.

Our healthcare systems continue to lead the way in infection prevention efforts in our state. Our hospitals have worked diligently to ensure we are effectively and proactively addressing infection risks.

Threats like the coronavirus are ever occurring and will continue to arise.

The key to keeping Delawareans out of harm’s way is preparation, knowledge and communication.

— Megan McNamara Williams is vice president of the Delaware Healthcare Association and an advanced practice nurse with more than 20 years of experience in population health, and hospital quality and safety.