



## A PASSION FOR CARE

# Excellence in care

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### Dr. Alistair Ingram: applying past lessons to stop the spread of COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, Dr. Alistair Ingram made contingency plans about how to replace doctors he expected could contract the virus.

“There was a great deal of anxiety and concern when the pandemic first broke out. Nobody was vaccinated. People were working directly with COVID patients,” said Dr. Ingram, the Chief of Medicine at St. Joseph’s Healthcare.

“When the pandemic first started, we made very exhaustive plans for how we would cover the large number of physicians we expected to get sick and be absent. But that never happened.”

In fact, throughout the pandemic, Dr. Ingram says that while some St. Joseph’s staff contracted COVID-19 in the community, almost no staff contracted the virus at work. The hospital also experienced fewer outbreaks compared to other hospitals.

“The number of outbreaks that we’ve had compared to other hospitals is not chance. We’re doing something different,” he said.

Dr. Ingram credits a few factors for St. Joe’s success with containing COVID-19. The first, he says, can be traced back to the hospital’s experiences with C. difficile outbreaks in 2010 and 2011 – an experience Dr. Ingram calls “a road to Damascus experience” that fostered a robust Infection Prevention and Control (IPAC) department.

“We have had a strong IPAC department since then, and a strong culture that

IPAC continues to push in terms of care when it comes to infection control,” he said.

“IPAC was able to move very quickly with COVID, on the back of what was a very strong culture, to really drill down about how we use PPE, how we could never take our minds off it. And I think they bear a large amount of credit for our success.”

He also credits the 5,000 staff, residents, and students at the hospital for following protocols, using PPE properly, and paying attention to the tiny details that can either prevent or spread infection. Sticking to regular routines as much as possible was also crucial, he said.

“As soon as one of your main medical wards has a patient with COVID, and then that spreads to another patient with COVID – you’re done. That ward is now closed for 2 weeks, and now you’ve got to find 50 beds somewhere else. The subsequent chaos that’s created, I think, provides more opportunity for COVID to spread elsewhere,” he said.

“The more you can continue to operate as you usually operate, with extraordinarily careful attention to PPE use and hand-washing et cetera, the more you are likely to be successful as time goes by – because the less you’re going to create chaos and problems. And I

believe that’s been a huge part of our success.”

Now that everyone has had an opportunity to be vaccinated, things have become somewhat calmer at the hospital, he said. In fact, the experience has served as a reminder about the joys and opportunities that come along with practicing medicine.

“The pandemic has served to help some of us regroup and refocus ourselves on our reasons we’re in medicine, which, after long years in practice, can kind of fade away from you a bit,” he said.

“It really has led a lot of us to realize how fortunate we are to be in this profession, how much we enjoy taking care of patients, and how much we continue to enjoy learning about new things – even something as tragic as COVID – there’s always something of interest you can find in it.” ■