**After difficult COVID-19 recovery, area physician details return to front lines of pandemic**

*w/callout box:*

***Lights to remember***

*March 16 marks the anniversary of the first COVID-19 case diagnosed at Tidelands Health. That evening, turn on your exterior lights to celebrate those who have recovered from the disease, honor those who have lost their lives to the illness and recognize the tremendous commitment and sacrifice of health care workers who have so selflessly battled the pandemic for the past year.*

At times, Dr. James Principe wasn’t sure he’d ever get back to his old self.

In early July, Dr. Principe, 61, developed severe complications from a COVID-19 infection.

For three nights, the board-certified internal medicine physician was hospitalized at Tidelands Waccamaw Community Hospital, where he received aggressive treatment led by medical professionals he has served alongside for decades.

By July 12, he had recovered enough to be discharged home, but he remained weak and lethargic.

“My recovery was slow,” says Dr. Principe, a hospitalist physician and associate chief medical officer at Tidelands Health. “The biggest frustration was that I remained short of breath and deconditioned and fatigued.”

**Slow recovery**

After his release from the hospital, Dr. Principe spent several weeks at home recovering with the help of his wife, Beth.

Even after he was able to return to work, Dr. Principe still struggled with lingering effects from his COVID-19 infection. Trips up the stairs winded him, so they were replaced by elevator rides.

He resumed limited exercise about a month after his discharge from the hospital, but it took another month before he fully regained his conditioning and strength.

“It’s a slow recovery. It’s not like having a head cold,” says Dr. Principe, who believes he was exposed to the virus by someone in his family who was ill. “I tell people to measure your progress in terms of weeks, not days.”

**A second wave**

Although Dr. Principe’s personal battle with COVID-19 is over, he and his colleagues at Tidelands Health have continued to combat the disease as health care workers on the front lines of the pandemic.

Not long after Dr. Principe completed his own recovery from COVID-19 in the fall, the number of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations at Tidelands Health and across our region began to climb, eventually reaching – then far exceeding – record levels seen over the summer.

As that second wave of infections washed over the state and nation, Dr. Principe and his colleagues at Tidelands Health found themselves facing tremendous physical and emotional strain in their efforts to care for a growing number of seriously ill patients. The health system’s emergency departments and critical care units consistently exceeded their capacities.

Even though treatment for COVID-19 has progressed significantly since the start of the pandemic, there remains no cure for the unpredictable disease, which can cause serious – and sometimes – fatal complications even among otherwise healthy people.

“We’re not used to having such a high mortality rate when people come in seriously ill,” Dr. Principe says. “That can get discouraging, especially when you’re working so hard.”

**The future**

Fortunately, case numbers and hospitalizations have declined recently, and Dr. Principe is hopeful that widespread COVID-19 vaccination will one day allow for an end to the pandemic and a return to a more normal way of life.

He didn’t hesitate to benefit from the vaccine when it became available to him under the state’s guidelines as a Phase 1A health care worker.

“We’re going to get through this,” he says. “But we need people to get vaccinated when they’re eligible and continue to wear masks, social distance and follow the other guidance.”