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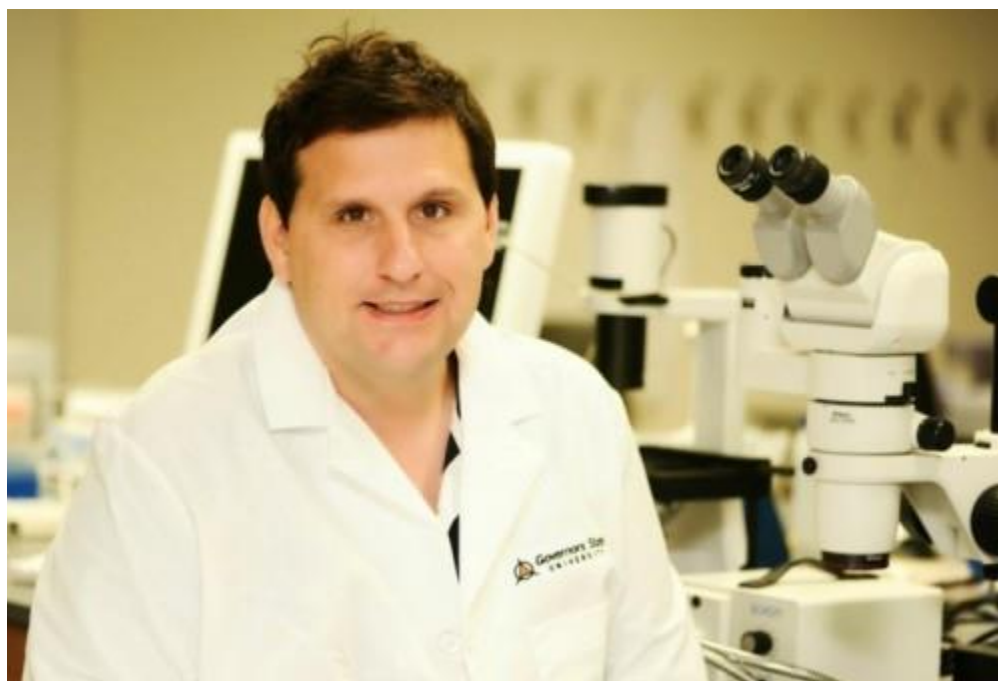
Governors State Chemistry Professor Doubles as COVID Family Nurse

Office of Marketing and Communications

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Governors State Chemistry Professor Doubles as COVID Family Nurse



Just before the pandemic brought the world to a screeching halt in March, [Governors State University Chemistry](#) Professor Walter Henne made a special trip to his laboratory on campus for a few critical items.

“I grabbed rubber bands and pulse oximeters,” said Henne, who has a nursing background and a knack for innovation.

He needed the rubber bands to make masks (“remember, you couldn’t find them?”) and had purchased the pulse oximeters –those contraptions medical staff place patients’ fingers to help determine oxygen levels – on eBay for his Analytical Chemistry classes to help teach students about the measurement and interaction of biologic molecules, substances need to help the body function.

Now, Henne wanted the tools in the event he needed to assist family members who developed what was to become a global pandemic – COVID 19.

No one could have known what the pandemic would bring, but Henne read the signs all around him – the markets plunged and the university suddenly shifted classes online even when there were relatively few cases in the U.S.

Now nearly 10 months in, Henne has taught a mixture of online lectures and in person laboratory courses and is providing medical counseling to several of his extended family members who have been exposed or tested positive for COVID. Among those infected have been two immediate family members who live in central Illinois. One member has recovered quickly, however, another remains hospitalized.*

Henne says his immediate family members followed the strictest CDC guidelines for nine months. Then, in early November they began experiencing flu-like symptoms. Henne said he's not sure what prompted their fever on or about Nov. 5, but points to a minor treatment they received at a local healthcare facility.

"This was the only CDC defined contact they had in the preceding week," Henne said, who has since taken on role of contact tracing for stricken family.

A professor for more than 10 years, his nursing background emerged once he learned his immediate family members likely had the disease in a small town heavily afflicted.

Their family doctor was ill, and the local health department was overwhelmed. Seeing his family struggle, Henne stepped in.

"I'm an R.N., so I started looking doing FaceTime calls to assess vitals and oxygen levels. I'd also look for blue tinging around their lips and listening for labored breathing," Henne said.

He also checked for a condition called silent hypoxia, which renders dangerously low levels of oxygen in COVID patients. This is a serious sign that often warrants hospitalization and many patients don't realize they have it. "These are oxygen levels like people would have if they are sitting on top of Mount Everest and not even know it and it can be deadly."

Henne admits he had to take it on himself to learn as much as he could as quickly as he could.

"I looked up a ton of stuff as I'm not an COVID-19 expert. I probably read 70 articles to learn as much as I could to help my family."

One thing he learned was the importance of a keeping a symptom calendar to determine the progression of the infection.

During a recent conversation, Henne referred to his notes to recall the calendar of symptoms and recovery. Though one immediate family member was sick only a few days; another member continues to struggle as the vaccine rolls out.

“This is really bittersweet. My family was looking so forward to the vaccine. They followed every CDC guideline for nine months and still contracted it. I can’t get there so I’m really grateful for FaceTime.”

**(Editor's note: Dr. Henne's family member passed after this story was posted. Read his heartfelt reflection [here.](#))*