

# Four Tallahassee doctors reflect on local coronavirus fight before the expected 'surge'

[Nada Hassanein and TaMaryn Waters](#), Tallahassee Democrat | Published 7:07 a.m. ET March 29, 2020 | Updated 8:28 a.m. ET March 29, 2020

*Monday, March 30 is National Doctors Day. Read the perspectives of four local doctors watching and working as the COVID-19 epidemic unfolds.*

As a historic pandemic sweeps through the nation along with orders to stay home to stay well, doctors and other health care workers put on their white coats and their scrubs — and they head to work.

The professionals knew what they signed up for when they took the treasured Hippocratic Oath. And the novel coronavirus has called them to put that care-taking promise into the ultimate practice during a time when it's never been more essential.

In Florida, 46 people have died and more than 4,000 across the state have been diagnosed with COVID-19 as of Friday evening, according to the Florida Department of Health. Leon County, meanwhile, has seen 17 coronavirus cases.

## Back story:

- [Florida coronavirus cases now over 4,000 as checkpoints go up at state borders](#)
- [Coronavirus in Leon County: Saturday sees three new positive cases, not travel-related](#)

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From those who are teaching budding medical school students, to those that look after fragile, palliative patients, the Tallahassee Democrat listened to four local doctors and what they had to say about the pandemic:

A pulmonologist at the helm of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare's adult ICU; Capital Regional Medical Center's chief medical officer with almost two decades of medical leadership under his belt; a Nigerian born doctor leading the virus response for a vast network of local doctors; and a vulnerable-populations and health disparities expert who runs Florida State University's Center for Medicine and Public Health.

Each are humble, deferring the front-line credit to the teams of nurses, technicians, doctors and public health workers. But they are united with their colleagues in a shared mission to see local residents safely through the pandemic.

With National Doctors' Day set for Monday, here are their stories.

## Dr. Carlos Campo: 'A duty to take care of our community' with the knowledge that the 'surge is coming'

Being a doctor, promising to take care of the ill is Dr. Carlos Campo's way of paying forward what was poured into him.

When his dad died when he was 6 years old, he and his siblings were raised by a single mom. She put him and his sister and brother, a child psychiatrist and infectious disease specialist, through medical school.

"I have a sense of responsibility and duty to take care of our community," said Campo, a pulmonologist and critical-care specialist, who is a 1991 graduate of Costa Rica's Universidad Autonoma De Centro America.



Dr. Carlos Campo is a board-certified pulmonologist, critical care specialist, and medical director of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare adult intensive care units, answers questions during a video conference interview with the Tallahassee Democrat, Thursday, March 26, 2020. (Photo: Alicia Devine/Tallahassee Democrat)

During a typical day in Campo's shoes as director of Tallahassee Memorial HealthCare's adult ICU, "The day's over when the work is done. There is no set hour."

Today's uncertainty amid the coronavirus brings its own new challenge of "when."

As test results slowly come back from around the state, the governor issues new orders and new guidelines and information trickles down from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Campo explains the situation is "live" — morphing.

In turn, so have the strategies of his team.

He continues to analyze protocol and techniques that have worked in other countries and states to influence his approach in fighting the spread of the virus and to protect patients and staff in the local hospital.

"We have taken the best of what worked in other places and incorporated it in our treatment algorithm, and we shared it with the medical staff," Campo told the Democrat through video chat.

According to DOH data, of the 38 coronavirus tests administered at the hospital, four have come back positive. To guard against spread of the virus, TMH announced Friday it will begin restricting visitors from entering the facility.

**More:** [TMH no longer allowing visitors due to coronavirus pandemic as Leon sees another two cases](#)

"It's an open protocol, so if people want to change something, critique the data — it's a live protocol. Everybody's contributing and changing it," he said.

## CORONAVIRUS TALLAHASSEE

### Our community responds



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Now more than ever, his health-care team members are leaning on each other to rise to the challenge together.

But in order for their efforts to have the most protective effect, the community has to do its part, he said.

"Stay indoors. Self-quarantine," he emphasized, advising younger residents to also heed the call.

"It's going to be very challenging moving forward ... we know this surge is coming," Campo said. "We don't know how it's going to look, when it's going to be, or if we have flattened the curve enough to have better outcomes. We have to be prepared and have faith that hopefully we'll get through this."

## Dr. Trey Blake: An unparalleled challenge to the medical system kindles hope that lessons have been learned

Dr. Trey Blake's father is in his early 70s. He's a judge in West Virginia, where about 100 COVID-19 patients have been diagnosed as of Friday.

Blake is here, 800 miles south serving as Capital Regional Medical Center's chief medical officer. He worries about his Dad.

"He's still holding court," Blake said. "The county next to him had seven people diagnosed in their courthouse because somebody brought it in."



Blake (Photo: Submitted)

He's told his dad not to hold court. "But like some fathers, he doesn't always listen to me," Blake said with a chuckle.

As CMO, it's Blake's job to make sure the hospital has enough testing kits, ventilators and protective gear for its workers to make sure they're safe.

"I think we better learn the lessons we need to learn from this," he said about health-care systems across the country scrambling to garner resources and stay afloat. "And I hope and pray this never ever happens again. But if it does, I'm truly hopeful that we're better prepared and that we've learned a lot of lessons that will help us get through the next one a lot better."

Blake starts his day around 4 a.m. Usually he'd head to the gym, but now that it's closed, he starts his day with a bike ride. But lately, his work days are getting longer, upwards of 14 hours with many calls after hours from staff.

For strength, Blake said he draws on his leadership experiences over the past 15 years, having served as medical director of the clinical decision unit at St. Mary's Medical Center in West Virginia, medical director of the center's hospitalist program and other roles on the medical executive committee.

He also taps into past experiences with patients. He remembers a young woman who was admitted to the hospital due to an overdose. As she lay on the hospital bed, battling the repercussions of the disease of addiction, her little girl sat in the waiting room. It was Easter weekend.

"I'll never forget that," he said. "I had a moment of what we would call 'tough love' with her. She came to tears, and later on was able to turn her life around... not that I was the reason, but I at least was a catalyst for thought."

It's filed away in the intimate memories with patients as they trust him and other health-care workers with their lives.

"You walk into a room and get into someone's life very quickly," he said. "They invite you in and you use that relationship to help them get better."

And while workers like Blake are locked in the same sense of uncertainty as everyone else, they instead brace themselves to chase the storm.

"This is a very fluid situation. Nobody has all the answers. Nobody has seen this before," he said. "No one can do this alone. Without the people, we can't run the hospital."

He knows tough conversations and times are ahead.

But that same Hippocratic Oath will still serve as the guiding compass to nurture people's health.

"In medical school and being a physician, you always read about it, you think about it, but you really never think it's going to happen to you," Blake said. "And so, you're always kind of a Doubting Thomas, but here we are — an incredibly historic time that's really going to challenge the entire medical system like never before."

## Dr. Adekunle Omotayo: 'The sun will shine tomorrow,' but we all must play a role

The last two weeks have been trying but manageable for Capital Health Plan as the novel coronavirus seizes major U.S. cities and threatens to blanket more.

With a specialty in internal medicine, Dr. Adekunle Omotayo manages CHSP's health care delivery system at CHP's Governor's Square Health Center and has spearheaded strategic steps in combating COVID-19.

"We are in this job because we choose to be in this job," he said. "The last week has been difficult because, we are about to constantly change what we're doing. We have to constantly adapt to where the situation is."

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Adekunle Omotayo (Photo: My View)

Born in Lagos, Nigeria, Omotayo graduated from the College of Medicine at the University of Lagos and later began his medical career in the United Kingdom, where he practiced internal medicine for several years.

He moved to the United States and completed his residency in Internal Medicine at Newark Beth Israel Medical Center in Newark, New Jersey, according to his CHP biography. In 2001, Omotayo joined CHP and planted roots in Tallahassee.

The challenge ahead in winning the fight against the coronavirus will be handling patient load and keeping essential staff safe. Everyone, he said, has a role to play in warding off a rapid spread.

The basics are critical: wash hands, use hand sanitizers, avoid touching your face and try to stay 6 feet away from others.

"If we all do that, there's a chance we can slow this down," he said, considering the United States went from having its first confirmed case on Jan. 20 to more than 101,270 cases two months later and at least 1,577

deaths.

At CHP, Omotayo said all business meetings among the medical staff are conducted through a teleconference. The waiting room is reformatted to stagger patients to create social distancing. In addition, appointments are set up so that well patients are seen in the morning; sick patients in the afternoon.

Understandably, the added pressures of the coronavirus weigh heavy on the doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers. Omotayo said it's his job to ensure his staff is well and ensure the safety of the community.

"The sun will shine tomorrow, and the after every winter there's a spring," Omotayo said. "This will come to an end and it won't go on forever. What I am encouraged by is that it's beginning to dawn on many of our citizens this is serious. They are getting more focus. And I think if we all get more focused and we all play our role, we'll be able to control pandemic."

## Dr. George Rust: Letting the science speak while he arms students with real life training

A health disparities researcher focusing on vulnerable populations over his decades-long career, amid today's crisis Dr. George Rust thinks of the most fragile patients.

Not just the medically compromised. But those with difficult socioeconomic circumstances and those battling mental illnesses.

He started his career looking after the health of migrant farm workers, and was trained at a county hospital in Chicago before moving on to teach for two decades at the historically black Morehouse College, focusing on the uninsured.



Dr. George Rust, who works with at the Department of Health and is a faculty member with Florida State's College of Medicine, shares what it is like being on the frontlines of the coronavirus pandemic, Friday, March 27, 2020. (Photo: Alicia Devine/Tallahassee Democrat)

**Spotlight on Tallahassee:**

- [Living with additional vulnerability in time of COVID-19](#)
- [Coronavirus and community: Kearney Center begins moving residents to prevent crowding at shelter](#)

"The vulnerable are always vulnerable — and in our current context, that's super important. Where does a homeless person go to self-isolate? If people don't have food or shelter, that's going to be an issue," he said. "Truth be told, we're all vulnerable ... (but) protecting the most vulnerable will help protect the community."

As a College of Medicine professor and director of FSU's Center for Medicine and Public Health, Rust teaches rising medical students about the interconnectedness of the health care system. He's always sought to build bridges between the realms of medicine and public health.

So, while he teaches the students to read EKGs, he also teaches courses on community and population health, and a course on epidemics and outbreaks — which "now seems woefully inadequate" as a one-hour lecture, he said.

Rust, a family doctor and preventative medicine public health specialist, has spent much of his career looking at health from a holistic societal lens.

And there's no more important time than now to pass on that knowledge. Next Friday, he'll take his medical students to staff slots at the city's drive-through COVID-19 testing site.

Under a state interchange agreement, Rust also serves as the medical director for the Leon County Department of Health along with health departments in the nearby rural counties of Wakulla, Gulf and Franklin. As director, he provides medical consultation, working closely with the epidemiology team that investigates outbreaks, which has been working round-the-clock to track the coronavirus.

He said public health and primary care workers like them are the heroes in the face of the crisis.

"It reminds us that public health is important — that we need to fund it," Rust said.

Reflecting on the lack of supplies and an overwhelmed health-care system in some places, he thinks back to the start of his own medical career on a trip to Haiti as a student. He now takes his own students on trips to Haiti's under-resourced communities.

"People in those settings learn to make do and are incredibly creative — and that's what I'm seeing here now," he said. "But we would all hope that we could do better.

"As health professionals, you learn to trust your equipment and your technique," Rust continued. "Because of the supply issues, I think everyone is now struggling with: How much can you compromise what your normal technique would be — and still be safe?"

Rust previously worked with Dr. David Satcher, former U.S. Surgeon General. As he watches the outbreak unfold and guides his students learning to be doctors in the middle of a historic pandemic, Rust remembers Satcher's mantra along the lines of, "Let the science speak."

Echoing Satcher, Rust's message today is this: Listen to the science.