Nancy Montoya: Dr. Derksen your specialty is rural health. Will something like this app (COVID Watch, exposure notification app) help you do a better job with the folks you’re working with out in the rural communities of Arizona?

Dr. Daniel Derksen: Yes, this one and others will give us more precise tools than just shutting everything down. Over the last few weeks I’ve put about three thousand miles on my vehicle helping set up our COVID-19 serum antibody testing sites, now in more than 30 sites in our 15 counties. It was really important to get out and meet with the nurses, physicians and administrators in these clinics and hospitals. We are a land grant university and expected to be a resource for the state as far as technology, new ideas, and innovation.

The COVID-19 pandemic, if there’s any positive side to it, has absolutely changed the way we teach, the way we learn, and the way we deliver care - both virtually and in person.

There’s nothing that’s accelerated the use of telehealth as this pandemic. Every clinic I visited, every one of Arizona’s 15 Critical Access Hospitals, now provide virtual telehealth visits. They had to adapt, because people with chronic diseases like diabetes, hypertension, and high cholesterol still need care. Many patients are reluctant to be exposed to people with this highly transmissible COVID-19 visiting the emergency department, inpatient or outpatient services.

Our state led the way in Medicaid (AHCCCS) paying for virtual visits. A few weeks ago at the federal level, Medicare began paying for those visits. We expect private insurers to pay for them.

The University of Arizona in partnership with the state of Arizona has now performed over 15,000 COVID-19 serum antibody tests around the state, prioritizing first responders and health workers. We use data in real time to help guide our policies. We think this antibody test will be particularly valuable, as Dr. Robbins mentioned, as a vaccine is developed and tested to answer questions like: Are individuals developing an adequate antibody response from the vaccine? Once you have measurable antibodies, how long will protection from COVID-19 infection last?

This is a critical role for the University of Arizona and for our faculty, staff, students, residents, and trainees across our five colleges - how we use data to better inform our policy interventions - as we focus internally on reopening and the importance of doing that as safely as possible.

Our students come from all over the state and they go back across the state and beyond our borders to other countries, to other states. We have to make sure that we can do that in as safe a manner as possible, protecting their health and their families’ health, when they go home for Thanksgiving. We have to use the best data and evidence available to inform those policies.

Nancy Montoya: I grew up in the Clifton, Morenci, Duncan area in Greenlee and Graham Counties. You can’t get much more remote than that. There’s always been a feeling of isolation, that we’re not getting the kind of care that the urban areas get. What does telemedicine mean to those areas? Are there any counties that are doing an especially good job?
Dr. Daniel Derksen: Dr. Robbins, Dr. Carmona and some others of us visited Governor Stephen Lewis in Sacaton this week, and met with tribal leaders from the Gila River Indian Community, first responders, public health leaders and Gila River Health Care. We visited their Incident Command Center in Chandler that serves their tribal community.

I think they’re doing a particularly good job of identifying, connecting, reaching out to their elders, to those with one or more chronic diseases, to make sure they’re getting the medications they need, the groceries they need.

When they have a positive COVID-19 test, they have a sophisticated system of contact tracing and follow up. I’m proud to say one of our University of Arizona MPH graduates, Candelarian Preston, is the Director of the Tribal Health Department for the Gila River Indian Community and leading efforts to make sure they stay connected with fellow community members.

Every business, every education institution, every county and tribal health department has to go to this precipice - it’s a little scary – and say, “How do we reopen? How do we do it?”

We have to get people back to work. We have to get faculty back to teaching. We have to get our students back to taking their courses and being able to graduate and get out there to provide the health services that we really need in these underserved areas.

Josh Mihesuah, MPH, of the Quahuada band of the Comanche Nation, in the Mel & Enid Zuckerman College of Public Health’s Health Services Administration Program discusses research creating curricular modules on contact tracing with the Arizona Department of Health Services and his faculty preceptor Cecilia Rosales MD, MS, Associate Dean of Phoenix Programs for MEZCOPH at UArizona.