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Dr. Larry Antonucci, president and CEO of Lee Health, speaks at a commemoration of the first COVID-19 death in Lee County on March 5, 2021. ANDREW WEST/FORT MYERS NEWS-PRESS & NAPLES DAILY NEWS/USA TODAY NETWORK-FLORIDA

Retiring Lee Health CEO reflects on legacy

Antonucci led vast expansion

Liz Freeman
Fort Myers News-Press & Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

Dr. Larry Antonucci signs off as president and CEO of Lee Health at the end of September, leaving the hospital system far different from when he took the helm in 2017: Construction projects big and small are everywhere to keep pace with growth. There’s new mind-boggling technology. And he and others remember being hit by the stealth COVID-19 virus that upended everything in daily life. It dealt another blow to hospital workers. They worked in unimaginable conditions, witnessing horrific losses of life and risking their own; some in the public pointed fingers of blame at the very people trying to heal the sick. If that wasn’t enough to drive Antonucci or other hospital CEOs to contemplate a run for the hills, there was little breathing room before he faced the next disaster of Hurricane Ian in late September 2022.

Lee Health workers kept showing up and plugging away despite many facing prolonged recovery from damage to their homes and psyches. Through it all, Antonucci, 72, steered the ship — that’s his job, after all — with a calm disposition that’s also a job requirement, to keep the troops on task. Lee Health is the largest employer in Lee County with a workforce today of 17,000 and medical staff of 2,500. Lee Health has total net operating revenue of \$1.9 billion with a margin of 5.6%, according to financials for the period ending March 31. It is responsible for \$5 billion annually in sales in the county. The system runs four acute care hospitals with a combined 1,865 beds, and 135-bed Golisano Children’s Hospital, along with a long list of outpatient and diagnostic centers. Total adult and pediatric admissions projected for the year are just under 53,000; emergency room visits are projected at 144,000. At groundbreaking events in recent months, Antonucci said Lee Health is investing \$1.7 billion over the next five years to meet growth in health care needs. When he became CEO in June 2017, the hospital system’s total net operating revenue was \$1.7 billion and its op-

erating margin was 4.2%. Despite all the changes and capital improvements Antonucci has ushered in, what has not faded from memory is his first day at Lee Memorial Hospital as a young obstetrician/gynecologist. “I remember the day in 1983 when I walked into that campus for the very first time and I met Sandra Wharton, who was the medical staff secretary, and Dr. Bob Arnold, who was the medical director,” Antonucci said. “Those were the first and second people I met and I recognized immediately it was a very special place.” Antonucci delivered babies for 24 years, many of them at Lee Memorial before deliveries moved to HealthPark Medical Center, roughly 10 miles south of Fort Myers. He delivered the first baby at Cape Coral Hospital. “Being an OB/GYN was incredibly rewarding, there is nothing like being able to hand a baby to new parents,” he wrote in a 2023 column about his 40-year anniversary on Lee Health’s medical staff. “I have had women stop me in stores, restaurants and other places throughout our community to show me pictures of their children that I delivered. I had a woman stop me to tell me I saved her

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Citrus disease spreading over U.S.

Greening reaches AZ, TX and CA

Jack Randall
Treasure Coast Newspapers
USA TODAY NETWORK

A contagious agricultural disease spreading across the country is threatening to wipe out American-grown oranges, grapefruit and other citrus fruits. Citrus greening, a pandemic blamed for killing over 90% of Florida’s citrus production, has gained a foothold across all major citrus-producing states in the United States — Florida, California, Texas and, most recently, Arizona. While harmless to people and other plants, the bacterial disease has been a death sentence for citrus. Once infected, most citrus trees die within a few years. Fruit — if any are produced — often grows deformed in a sickly green color, hence the name. It spreads farm-to-farm through an invasive insect, the Asian citrus psyllid. Plant tissue samples collected from residential properties in Arizona tested positive for citrus greening in February 2025, which meant a devastating disease with no known cure had infected the last holdout. The Arizona Department of Agriculture established a quarantine in Santa Cruz County to protect the state’s \$63 million citrus industry. “If allowed to expand and establish throughout the state, this disease could have a devastating effect on Arizona’s citrus industry,” according to

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Leak spills 2,000 gallons of chlorine in Lehigh Acres

Amy Bennett Williams
Fort Myers News-Press & Naples Daily News
USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

An estimated 2,000 gallons of liquid chlorine, enough to fill about 40 average bathtubs, escaped a containment area at Lehigh Acres’ wastewater treatment plant in Lee County on Sept. 18 and reached adjacent grounds, according to a report filed with state regulators. Although utility officials said the spill didn’t reach nearby storm drains or waterways, whether Southwest Florida’s sandy, porous soil allowed contamination of the shallow or surficial aquifer is unclear. Neither the Florida Department of Environmental Protection nor the utility responded immediately to questions about how deeply the chlorine may have penetrated the soil.

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