

Lessons from Week Three of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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We are currently in Week Three of the COVID-19 pandemic. My personal life as I know it has been cancelled. I have no races on the calendar. My kids can't go to school and are trying to learn the best they can online. Every day my family has at least 3 Zoom meetings scheduled, sometimes multiple meetings going at once. On the upside, we have breakfast and dinner together every day. I have been able to participate in our family's morning prayer time and devotionals. We are playing more games and going on more hikes and bike rides.

As a physician, however, work is certainly not cancelled. During this time, doctors and healthcare providers are needed and in high demand. As a family physician in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, we are not quite at the peak of COVID-19 infections. Still, though, most of my patient care visits are now being done through telemedicine, reserving physical appointment slots for newborn weight checks, prenatal care, and acute non-respiratory complaints. Sometimes I feel like I don't know how to take care of patients anymore, as we are not supposed to be seeing anyone with ANY respiratory complaints, to limit the use of PPE (personal protective equipment). It's hard to know how to help a patient when I can't even listen to their lungs.

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For the first week or two of this “new normal,” I found myself suddenly unable to sleep, where that had never been a problem for me before. I was constantly on my phone looking at different Facebook physician groups, the news, and the barrage of new hospital-wide and university-wide emails dealing with the Pandemic. This was after several months of really doing well with limiting my phone use, trying to be more “present” with the actual humans in my life. I started having some chest pain and new anxiety symptoms. I cried at least once per day. Then, I regrouped, realized that the news would still be there if I only checked it once per day, and started to do better. I am taking things day by day, trying to do my best to take care of my patients, and I am able to offer some of my anxious patients the same advice I had given to myself. I’ve already received patient feedback that it helps. I am sleeping again as well.

This past weekend, I was on call on Labor and Delivery for our resident Maternal Child Health service. It was a much-needed break from the rest of the world. Other than the hospital being very bare with the new no-visitor policy, having to show my badge to even get in the building, and more staff wearing masks, no one was really talking about COVID-19. Of course there were signs everywhere, screening questions to be asked, and blue tape marking off 6-foot zones from patient to desk areas, but women were still presenting in labor to have babies. There was only one visitor allowed with each laboring mother, meaning that no doulas were allowed if the partner was present; I found myself taking turns with one mother’s husband as we rubbed her back in between contractions. I attended three births that night with my resident, and I felt like

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the world was right. As long as babies are being born, life can go on. Families can still be together. It felt really good.

Another thing I have been thinking about is how the COVID-19 pandemic is changing the profession of medicine, in many ways for the better. For the first time in my lifetime, big hospital systems are prioritizing patient and employee well-being over making money. Innovative approaches to seeing patients through telemedicine are being used, even before insurance companies fully commit to reimbursement. If employees are sick, they are encouraged to stay home instead of the previous culture of coming into work no matter what. Elective surgeries that are often big revenue-producing parts of the hospital system are being canceled to decrease use of unnecessary PPE and increase hospital bed capacity if needed. There has been so much change in medicine the last three weeks, often for the better.

I wish it didn't take a global pandemic like COVID-19 to force families to spend more time together, for healthcare to stop caring only about making money, for neighbors to start being neighborly, for people looking out for the good of others and not just for themselves (for example, staying home and "social distancing" not necessarily for their own health, but to protect the most vulnerable in their communities). I truly believe we are going to come out of this having learned many valuable lessons, and for that I am thankful. I am proud to be a doctor, and though I may not be doing the COVID-19 swabs or working in the ICU, I can help patients be less anxious, I can tell patients whether to stay at home or present to be tested, I can bring new babies

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into the world, and I can support laboring moms whose doulas are not allowed in. In this time of so much uncertainty, I can hold onto what is always true. Life goes on.

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