

A little Pandemic - Azle Style

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January 2020 Approaching my 26th year at Texas Health Harris Methodist Hospital in Azle, TX. Director of the Cardiopulmonary Department. This 36-bed critical care feeder hospital in the Texas Health System. Had seven Respiratory Therapists (counting myself and PRN {per diem} worker). Now we have the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the social and economic structure of America changed forever! At this writing, it is 1900 hrs. and my night guy just called in.

This disease is a novel virus, meaning humans have no natural immunity to it. As such, it swept across the world as people traveled, aided by the long symptom-free incubation period. The first we heard of this virus was from Wuhan China. The nature of the Chinese government and its media blackout caused the virus to be a worldwide threat. There were 410,000 travelers to America from China before travel curtailed. Similar travel patterns assured the virus was worldwide before mitigation was in place.

By the middle of April, America and indeed large parts of the world were in 'lockdown'. The economy was starting to crumble due to the stagnation forced by the mitigation efforts. In my small part of the world, we were doing fine. Working every day and there was no end in sight to my job. As a respiratory therapist, the need for my skill set had never been higher. Wife was housebound but productive. She was sewing for the grandchildren and the public. As I write this, 04/07/2020, she is making sixty masks for \$10 apiece for a company. We are living our private lives as if nothing is happening. Go to work, I come home, we talk, we eat, we do our normal day to day, then repeat the process. The only things that have changed are:

1. Social Distancing – everyone is supposed to stay at least six feet apart.
2. No groups larger than 10 people – everything is takeout or online, etc.
3. Everyone wears masks – to mitigate getting the virus: a little like putting up a chain- link fence to keep the mosquitos out!
4. No handshakes, no hugs – even from the grandkids. 😞
5. People wear gloves everywhere they go.
6. Only essential travel – supposedly.
 - a. Travel papers have become a possibility!
 - i. Our company sent papers out just in case.
 - b. Going to Walmart (or any store) to shop has gained a certain social onus.

Work, it is a hugely different story! We are worried about the virus. It is extremely contagious and can be deadly. The number of fatalities per one thousand patients, fail to exacerbate my general apprehension. However, I am careful. Must help intubate COVID positive patients. At this writing, we are shipping all ventilated patients elsewhere, due to a need for specialties we don't offer. Know this bit of good luck will not last. We are negotiating a contract with a critical care group. Consequently, I am preparing the department for a surge of patients that will need our attention.

Constantly updating and tweaking surge plans; feels like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. Seemingly daily, I see and order something new to add to our arsenal of devices to work with COVID patients. Today we got in new, truly 100% oxygen masks that I saw in one of my online and paper trade magazines... Tried one out on a hypoxic patient in the ICU and was very satisfied with its efficacy! To quote a tv action star from the 1980s “I love it when a plan comes together”! We have been lucky, but my ‘bones’ tell me that our turn in the blender is coming. Our sister hospitals are running at capacity and beyond. They have borrowed ventilators and are running anesthesia machines as beside ventilators.

As it is, we must treat every patient as if they are infected. That means wearing a gown, gloves, goggles, mask, and a face shield in the rooms. If we are doing anything that generates an aerosol, then the mask must be an N95. The garb is hot and impersonal. All the patients can see is your eyes.



Often the patient is also wearing a mask. All this makes everyone safer but interferes with the interpersonal part of caregiving! That is the part that I excel in, so I don't like this! Although, I was able to ‘do my thing’ even in all the garb with a bipolar patient today. She had not slept in days, and I was able to calm her and put her to sleep by talking to her, holding her hand, and stroking her head. The sitter in the room with her asked how I did that, and I said, “it was easy, I am a kindred spirit”!

Job is ‘interesting’ at times. One of my employees doesn't want to do our basic job for fear of the virus. Another is so ‘tender’ that she cries when anyone uses an authoritative tone! A proven circumstance of late. Understanding when I talk to her. But what I want to do is take her by the shoulders, look her in the eye, and tell her be the therapist I know she is. Instead, am ‘protective papa’ and run interference... It's a headache! Oh well, it is as they say, “it's why I get the big bucks”.

Now it is the end of December. The real crest is here! Everyone is ragged and getting worse by the day. The hospital is full, and it is all COVID. It seems like not a shift goes by

without a CODE! Began my SURGE PLAN STAFFING, it causes me to work crazy hours! I did get Christmas off!

01/01/2021. Employee Health just told me that I am COVID positive. Going home to rest. Just found out that my second in command, is out, she has it too! We are both out for the busiest week this place has seen in years! 01/02, my oxygen saturation is 79%. Going to the ER. Show a ground glass appearance on my chest Xray! Dr Miller admitted me to the ICU. In the hospital for 4 days with COVID. Don't remember the first two. Had an excellent response to therapy. SO PROUD of how my staff is pulling together in the crisis!!! SO PROUD of my staff. They have pulled together and helped cover for each other!

07/01/2021. Still not 100% and may never be. I now have interstitial lung disease and my ekg post COVID now shows an infarct that wasn't there pre-covid. On O² at night. Can be a poster boy for Long COVID! 😊

08/15/2021 The Delta Variant and > 1/3 of the population refusing to get vaccinated, has caused another HUGE influx of patients. Recently, we had *forty-six* patients in our licensed for thirty-six beds hospital. They are here, because every other hospital within range of transport, is equally over run. On what was our worst day so far, we had ten ventilators, four bipaps, and eight airvos running. The vent patients doubled up in our six ICU rooms! The BiPaps on the Med Surg floor watched by televue pad. We had eight deaths in one week. People on the ventilator and as much pressor as we could give, but they die anyway! Present at all but one of the deaths as Respiratory, Chaplain or both. Withdrew care on one and while doing so the patient in the next room expired. Know that therapists are triaging - leaving things not done. There is no help for it! Our productivity shows we were short ***twenty-two FTEs***.

Having PTSD nightmares. Wake up in disturbed state, dreamed I am at work, alone, helpless to keep a patient from dying. Sleeping in the recliner to keep from bothering my wife. That feeling haunts me all the time! Praying, I Hold tight to my faith in the Lord and take my psychoactive drugs! Know my staff are suffering the same. Can't do anything about it! No RAC or CSO RTs available. Had a PRN position out for MONTHS! Getting a smattering of support from other departments in the system. Thank you, Cleburne and Denton!

09/16/2021 Due to the efforts of our Tonya our COO and Brian my boss. Now I have three people per shift both days and nights!!

10/04/2021 Am building fancy jewelry boxes from exotic woods and putting nice watches in them. Will schedule a night with coverage that is not my core staff. Will take them to a nice steak house on me, give them the boxes and tell them Happy RT week. It is not enough to thank them!

Waiting on Lambda!