

How COVID-19 Showed Me the Importance of Patient Education

“He was completely healthy before he died from COVID” is a statement that has become a catchphrase to my ears. There have been many concerns throughout this pandemic, but as a young person, I cannot say my own personal health has been the main one. Rather, it is my support structure, those who have shaped me, the people who have enabled me to get as far as I have that cause my chest to tighten when I hear those words: my parents. As a trainee clinician, my support structure may be greater than some but that only means I have more to lose, and that thought has impacted my training.

As someone who was homeschooled for my K-12 education, I have always been very close with my parents. They have always been my everything, from my guides in life, to my best friends, and even my counselors in school. I remember in school going out shopping with my mom, trying to get the best deals at second hand stores. And going out to flea markets with my dad, bored to tears while looking at tools, but enjoying the sweet success of ice cream at the end of the day after walking the market in the Florida heat.

Their tutelage guided me to enter college and medical school early; as such I am currently track to be a fully-fledged doctor at 27 years of age, a feat I never could have achieved without their support along the way. No matter what happens in my life, I have always known that I could rely on them.

As I reflect upon these past years, my time with my parents has certainly decreased. No longer do we go on weekly outings or visit every night. Instead, I have focused on academia. COVID awakened a new reality: one day they may be fine, but the next they may be refused from an ICU at full capacity. We are all aware that someday our parents will no longer be with us, but nothing makes that reality starker than a highly contagious pandemic that has killed as many as 10 Vietnam wars in the US.

As the numbers grew, so did my fears. I started picturing the worst, being stuck far from home in classes and my parents contracting the disease and being hospitalized, the last time I had seen them being months ago. My sleep worsened and my calls to home conversely became more frequent. When classes were finally cancelled, I was finally able to go home, even if only for a brief spell before the whirlwind of rotations. Being with them to weather the initial storm, the fear of the unknown that is a new highly contagious virus sweeping the nation, strengthened and renewed my resolve moving forward on my path.

While one would hope the widespread distribution of the vaccine would help with my concerns, my patient encounters leave me wanting. Many who qualify for the vaccine say they do not want it. One patient was citing other medications that has proven unsafe, even discussing how new studies have found baby powder to be unsafe, so how could she trust this vaccine. Another had had Lyme’s disease in the past and said that it was a contraindication, because one of his friends had had Lyme’s at some point and passed away after getting the vaccine. I have encountered so many people who do not trust the vaccine, but then they still go around taking off their masks and endangering others because they are “over” the pandemic. It’s easy to say “patient education is important”, but in a time like this where misinformation and mistrust of

even medical professionals about what they are the most qualified to teach is abundant, the only tool left in our arsenal against this pandemic is working to build trust and spread proper patient education. However, I still wonder if it is enough. After all we can't force people to be vaccinated, regardless of watching numbers grow. People have excuses to not get it off fake evidence, regardless of my fear for my loved ones who can't get vaccinated. This entire experience has shown me the importance of being the best clinical educator I can be, not a sentence or two, but being willing to sit down and have a real discussion with a patient who is misinformed so that in my own small way I can be part of the outreach campaign medicine needs to genuinely help people.