

Anonymous

Surviving the Front-Line of Covid-19

My hometown, Brooklyn, was one of the boroughs hit the hardest by Covid-19. As I reflect on my experience at the beginning of this pandemic, I remembered thinking that it really was an inopportune time to be working in a hospital. The need for frontline workers was so great that it did not matter I was in administration with no medical background. By the second week in March 2020, the hospital sent out notice of staff reassignment and began implementing measures to screen, isolate and treat anyone showing symptoms of the virus. By this time too, hospitalized patients had already started to show signs of infection. Visitors were identified as the source of infection for patients and visitation was immediately suspended. Entrances and exits to the hospital were closed except for one. I was placed at that one entrance and exit to stop and screen everyone who came to the hospital, both visitors as well as staff members. This new assignment posed significant risk to me as I engaged random individuals daily. Most visitors came in coughing, showed signs of weakness, had body aches and flu like symptoms. To make matters worse, the hospital did not have enough protective gears for staff members as New York City (NYC) government was fighting with the federal government for assistance.

By the end of March 2020, I had screened hundreds of individuals. The daily precautions to remain free of the virus had taken a mental toll on me. I was exhausted and could not take off as the Governor's emergency orders prevented essential workers from calling out. What was even more difficult was the fact that I could not sleep during the evenings. The blast of sirens in NYC kept me awake most nights. At first, it was

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about every twenty minutes but as time went on, the sirens were heard every five minutes.

At the beginning of April 2020, I started feeling ill. I was exhibiting flu like symptoms. My body ached, my head pained severely on the left side and my nose was running mucus. On reporting my symptoms to our medical department, I was screened and told that it appears to be the common cold. I was not tested since there were limited tests available within NYC hospitals at that time. I was faced with the options of resigning, staying home and face the consequences or continuing to work despite my ill health. I chose to continue working as I needed my job and did not want to be part of the hundreds of thousands that had already lost their livelihoods.

Out of concern for their health, staff members began getting tested at private clinics and laboratories and results were coming back positive. The hospital began tracking positive cases among staff members. Our mornings began with a meeting to discuss the infection rate within NYC as well as among staff members and cases within the hospital. What was heartbreaking was learning of staff members who contracted the virus and died. It left one thinking - will I be next?

I recalled being at work around mid-April when a work colleague ran into the office crying. I became nervous and afraid.

I shouted, "What's the matter? What's happening?"

She responded in a shaken tone, "She's gone, she's gone."

I learnt that an awfully close work colleague on our floor had died from Covid-19. Later that day, during my lunch hour, I saw everyone sending condolences to the family

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of a close friend on Facebook. I immediately broke out in tears after learning that my friend had also died from the dreaded disease. The following day, a work colleague lost both his mother and father to the virus. I was gripped with fear at the realization that people known to me were dying. I had a hard time trying to come to grips with this reality.

By the end of April, I was assigned to the escort department. That department was short of staff due to its members becoming infected and having to be off the job. At this time, the hospital had stopped giving updates of the infection rate and death toll among staff members. In fact, a memo was sent out making it against company policy to disclose ones Covid-19 status. The escort department was responsible for moving Covid-19 patients, whether dead or alive. I remembered asking a staff within the department, "How do you cope?" She informed me that she drinks alcohol to numb herself. The next few weeks, I found myself drinking every night after work. There were containers at the back of the hospital, and we were responsible for moving the dead and packing them into the containers since the morgue could not accommodate the numbers. I have never seen so many dead people in my life. Now that I am reflecting, it is all a blur to me - a distant memory even though it was only a few months ago. I numbed myself with alcohol to the point where it all does not appear real to me anymore.

As an immigrant, coming to the United States of America was like a dream come through. I always thought the United States valued life and I wanted to be a part of a country where my life would be valued. Covid-19 revealed otherwise. I stood day after day as bodies were packed and discarded; no funerals, no loved one, just discarded as

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if their existence was a meaningless past. I looked around me and I was surrounded by chaos, individuals so busy that no time was spent to even acknowledge a fallen. With masks on and gloves fitted to my hand, I looked to the sky and asked God, "Will I be next?" As tears fell from my eyes, I reflected on how I have lived and whether I have made a mark to be remembered should I die. In that moment, I got an answer. Life is unpredictable and we all must work each day on surviving. Covid-19 is still with us and no vaccines yet. I am still alive, on the frontline – trying to survive.