

Covid Reflection

I was 10 years old watching the morning news and eating a bowl of Golden Grahams in my Catholic school uniform when two planes flew into the World Trade Centers. I was 18 years old when the subprime mortgage crisis and Great Recession occurred with millions unemployed. On both occasions, I was in school while global stability was irrevocably fractured sending us on an unknown trajectory. I was merely an observer awaiting the results of the world I would soon encounter.

After several years working as an engineer, I decided to go to medical school. Being a student again was a rough adjustment in that almost everything is practice and your contributions are minimal. You watch others solve problems and get things done. It seems that in another defining moment of the 21st century I again find myself a student observer. During this pandemic, I moved home temporarily into what was my childhood bedroom. I sit in the same living room and turn on the TV to witness the barrage of journalistic hysteria, political bickering, allegations of government subversion, and the "someone to blame" fear mongering I've long been accustomed to. As a medical student, I cannot say COVID has affected me personally in any way other than making the next several months of my life a guessing game for my educational trajectory, an insignificant price to pay. It's yet another rendition where I sit and watch as the world redefines itself and I await the results.

Having the ample time to watch the news and read the New York Times daily, I have a deep concern for the medical community not only regarding the immediate danger of the disease for patients and staff, but also for our future role in public health and as leaders in the community. The management of this pandemic is inevitably political, and in some regards I feel that science is being politicized as well. I watch as public skepticism and resentment seem to be increasing and the frustration of a furloughed economy is weighing heavy on individuals and their families. I grew up in a small town outside Des Moines that is a solid red/republican district. The attitudes of my friends and neighbors from home regarding government management of this pandemic is much different than my more liberal friends in Iowa City. I am always alarmed at the disdain I hear for Dr. Fauci as he tries to navigate recommendations for states reopening. I am equally disheartened by the vitriol I hear for our governor. I am always playing moderator.

Medical ethics has given a framework for physicians and patients approaching contentious situations with the values of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice being leading considerations. What is interesting about the situation we find ourselves in is these principles are not only extrapolated and applied across a population, but also enforced by a government. In a country where citizens exalt their personal freedom as the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, this will inevitably be a problem. I find myself constantly questioning the application of these values and ask others to do the same as we empathize with our fellow citizens. I am not on the front lines risking my health and watching patients die, but my colleagues are. I am not over 65 and in a population where ventilator rationing could dictate I won't have access to one, but my mother is. I also haven't lost my job, wondered where my next meal will come from, experienced depression or loneliness, or felt anxious about the bills I have to pay. I can, however, try to empathize with people who are sick, scared, suffering, or angry by acknowledging the dynamic and nuanced complexities of stakeholders in this the situation; That would be all of us.

I am not sure how many more weeks I will spend my days alone waiting for the medical recommendation or government approval that allows me to continue with the life I was previously living. I'm also quite certain it won't be the same as it was before. I hope my colleagues stay safe while doing the best they can with the knowledge and resources they're given. I expect the community and individual citizens to make everyone's safety and well-being a priority. And I sincerely hope we can listen to one another and acknowledge individual tribulations. Meanwhile, I'll watch and wait.