

Spending the Holidays Working

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Spending the Holidays in the Hospital

There's no place like home for the holidays, unless of course you're in the business of medicine.

For many physicians, the upcoming holiday occasions marked by feast and family are often work days, plain and simple. Some physicians are stuck working those days; some actually volunteer.

We asked hospital-based physicians about the challenges of working on special days and to share lessons they've learned about ways to make working during the holidays a little bit brighter. Here's what they had to say.

Although holidays in the hospital don't fit a one-size-fits-all routine, doctors say they have a unique flavor.



"Once you're in the hospital and you get into the swing of work, the melancholy drifts away," says Dr Chris Frost, a hospitalist and national medical director for LifePoint Health in Brentwood, Tennessee. "There's a degree of esprit de corps or solidarity when you are with your hospital-based team on a holiday. It creates a real unifying sense of purpose."

The ED Is Very Busy

In the emergency department (ED), holidays are generally hopping, says Dr Kevin Rodgers of Indiana University Academic Medical Center in Indianapolis. With primary care offices closed, the flu season is in full swing, and holiday revelry results in an increase in alcohol- and weather-related trauma injuries. Anxious out-of-towners who haven't seen their senior relatives in months will rush their loved ones to the ED, unaware that their fragility is the result of months-long deterioration and not a sudden ailment. Support staff may be thin and admitting patients can be a challenge, which means boarding them in the ED. Invariably, there will be people walking around the ED in Santa hats, and "I think some of our patients—who've had a little too much—believe Santa is actually there," Dr Rodgers says. *[Editor's note: Medscape is saddened to learn that Dr Rodgers passed away in November.]*

For ob/gyns, holidays are a wildcard. Although procedures and cesarean sections aren't scheduled for holidays, babies tend to make their own decisions about when to arrive on the scene.

"Sometimes you hear crickets; sometimes it's as busy as your busiest day," says Dr Betsy LeRoy, a Cincinnati, Ohio-based ob/gyn, "but it's fun to deliver holiday babies. On Thanksgiving, you can hold out a big meal as a reward to encourage Mom to push. On New Year's Eve, people celebrate the tax deduction. On New Year's Day, it's always fun to see who will be the first baby."

In other parts of the hospital, a slower holiday pace provides a welcome chance to spend a few extra minutes with patients, says Dr Frost.

"I think people have a mindset that providers will zoom in and zoom out to try to minimize their time at the hospital on a holiday. My experience was exactly the opposite. You had the time to talk to patients and just acknowledge that it stinks to be in the hospital on a holiday."

Giving Bad News During the Holidays Is Difficult

Holidays are an especially difficult time for patients and their families, he says. And that creates an additional burden for physicians. He remembers one Christmas when he had to tell a patient he had metastatic lung cancer.

"There's never a good day to share that type of news, but for me, the fact that it was Christmas made me feel an added degree of responsibility to get it right, because you are affecting the holiday for this person and their family in an indelible way. From that moment on, they will associate the holiday with the day they heard the bad news."

Because the patient's children were in town for the holiday, Dr Frost says he was able to deliver the news when the family was together, and the patient felt loved and supported. "I think it helped him, and if the family hadn't been together for Christmas, I wouldn't have had that opportunity."

A Moveable Feast

Physicians who work unorthodox schedules say flexibility and family support are essential to a joyful holiday—whatever holiday it may be. Who cooks the meal or wraps the gifts, or even what day the holiday is celebrated, often has more to do with work schedules than tradition.

Turkey tastes the same no matter what day you eat it.

"A holiday is a date on a calendar and is to some degree arbitrary," says Dr Frost. "Turkey tastes the same no matter what day you eat it, and when our kids were young, we would repurpose December 28 or some other day to be our Christmas. They didn't know better, and then when they got older, they enjoyed that Santa Claus had a special night when he was only visiting the Frost family."

This year, Christmas will be on December 26 for Dr Rodgers, who will spend the actual holiday in the ED at Indiana University Academic Medical Center. Dr Rodgers says his family hasn't just accommodated his schedule over the years; they've embraced it by taking on extra chores and responsibilities when he can't.

"It's very countercultural. Everything is a shared project." During his residency and early faculty years, Dr Rodgers worked a lot of overnight shifts on Christmas Eve so that he could enjoy opening gifts with his family on Christmas morning. That left his wife to fly solo on Santa duty for their four children.

"She had to get everything ready on Christmas Eve by herself," he says. "I think she can put together a bike just as well as I can."

Dr LeRoy says her husband will take on the responsibilities of chief elf this year, as she will be on call on Christmas Eve. "Fortunately, he takes direction well," she jokes. "Planning is of the utmost importance to making everything work. We don't make last-minute Christmas Eve trips to the mall."

A Change of Plans

But even the best-laid plans sometimes go awry. A few years ago, Dr LeRoy invited her parents and siblings to town for a big Thanksgiving dinner, but was called to the hospital before she could get the turkey in the oven.

"Fortunately, my mom took over. She said, 'Show me where everything is, and I'll make it happen.' And she did." For Dr LeRoy, the day consisted of one surgical emergency after another. When she returned home hours later, it was to a plate of warmed-over turkey and fixings. "I missed the big meal, but it was okay. Knowing that my whole family was in my house enjoying the meal made me happy."

Still, the transition from home to work can feel "pretty sad and hollow" on a holiday, says Dr Frost. "Backing out of the driveway on Thanksgiving or Christmas was always the hardest part."

Dr Kris Rehm, a pediatric hospitalist with Vanderbilt Medical Center, agrees. She remembers rushing off to work one Christmas shortly after her four sons opened their gifts. "We'd gotten them these little electric motorbikes for Christmas, and I'd pulled my car out of the driveway so the kids could try them out." When her husband tried to do the same, he backed into her car. "I was really sad to be leaving all the fun and chaos of Christmas morning, and to have to drive to work in a smashed-up car was the icing on the cake."

Dr Frost's experience encapsulates the mixed blessing that many physicians say defines holidays in the hospital. Holidays are hard to work, doctors say, but with a little forethought and a shift of perspective, they can be both merry and rewarding.

Have a Happy Holiday

How do you do that?

- **Celebrate your work family.** Share a meal, have a potluck, or exchange small or silly gifts, Dr Rehm says. "You may not be with your family, but you can still celebrate with people who mean a lot to you."
- **Make it festive.** Dr Frost recalls working in a hospital where a group of caroling nurses, respiratory therapists, members of the environmental services staff, and an ED doc visited patients throughout the hospital on Christmas day.
- **Ask for stories.** Dr Frost says inviting patients to share holiday stories can make the day more meaningful for patients and physicians alike. "I'd ask them for stories about how they celebrated or what they did when they were kids, and their eyes would light up when they talked. Sometimes they'd tell me something and I'd think, 'I should try that next year.'"
- **Reach out to those in need.** Dr Rodgers notes advocacy work can be especially fulfilling around the holidays. Indiana University medical students run a free clinic for the underserved and will often host holiday parties or meals for their clientele. "Our residents will tell you that to be able to do something for these people outside of the ED during the holidays makes them feel good."
- **Support your colleagues.** On Christmas morning last year, Dr Carol Choi, one of Dr LeRoy's partners, got a call. "I was about to head into the hospital and Betsy called. She said, 'I just saw your patients for you. Stay home with your family. Merry Christmas.'" Over the years, Dr Choi says, she's worked with a lot of physicians who have been similarly generous. "They've signed up for Christmas shifts either because they don't celebrate the holiday or because their kids are older and they wanted to let the doctors with younger children be at home on Christmas morning." Those are the types of gifts you remember, Dr Choi says, far more than the ones that come in boxes with bows. "Those are the kind of gifts you pay forward."

Above all, Dr Rodgers says, doctors and their families need to embrace fully the reality that their lives operate on a different calendar.

"My kids are grown now, and they still ask, 'Dad, what day are we going to celebrate Christmas? What day are we going to do Thanksgiving?' It's just what we do. I've been a residency director for 30 years, and we always say to the residents, 'Your life is going to exist on your own calendar, and your calendar is not like other people's calendars.'"

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