



Take Three for Sondra Zabar, MD

A New Year in a Pandemic World

An optimistic outlook on change.

Transformational Times: What has being a physician during the pandemic taught you about medicine, and navigating the unknown?

During the pandemic, we were living history. I found this a unique and humbling experience. In contrast, when I was a resident in the early 1990s, I thought we knew everything about the medical management of HIV (antiretroviral treatment had just emerged) and I was learning about the new treatments for diabetes as they were becoming available. Somehow those advances did not seem so dramatic or unknown. We became used to assuming that advances would come steadily. Living through COVID was a really different experience. We were innovating daily in the face of many unknowns. The facts on the ground were changing constantly. This was hard for patients, the health care team, and our systems.

I find that people have a hard time seeing how things have changed over such a short time. Many patients and clinicians feel stuck and scared. We must appreciate how hard it has been, how terrifying it was and how it takes time for perspectives to change. It is a challenge to stay in the present while also respecting the recent past. I am continually reminded how hard it is for people to change their world views and attitudes.

What stands out? It became much more important to talk about topics that we hadn't needed to discuss for a long time. For instance, vaccine reluctance has always been an issue, but now it moved to the forefront. We all needed to become skillful about talking with patients and our family and friends about this. We needed to learn to address disinformation. As you always say, what is old is new again.

Transformational Times: How are you doing, three years into the pandemic, at the start of a new year? Are you feeling optimistic? Burned out? How has the pandemic changed your perspective?

I am an optimistic person; I am feeling very positive that we are now finding the balance between remote and in-person work. Prior to the pandemic, we were together all the time and then for more than two years, we were isolated. The recent two-day, inperson retreat between

the NYU and the Kern Institute to discuss our collaborations was especially energizing because it reminded me how important being together is to creative work.

Recently we had 60 attendees at our Division's Grand Rounds because it is remote. This is many more attendees than we typically had when it was in person. This demonstrates we can leverage the strengths of both ways of working together. We will never go back to in person for formal meetings because we have members of our division all over New York City's five boroughs, most of whom could not be at Grand Rounds in the past. On the other hand, we are having a holiday party where everyone is coming together. We are using in person group work where it is useful and leveraging remote work when that helps us all be together.

I personally don't think my faculty are more burned out now than before the pandemic. For General Internal Medicine, there has been a looming health system crisis that has nothing to do with the pandemic. There just aren't enough doctors to go around. Finding a personal physician has become too hard. We do not have sustainable systems in place to increase the capacity for general internal medicine, and we are working on creating more attractive pathway for careers in GIM. Our current workforce is working harder for less reimbursement.

Transformational Times: What has helped you, personally and professionally, cope with the added stress and uncertainty of the pandemic?

It won't surprise you that it has been my community, my colleagues, that have helped the most. We started a weekly divisional leaders huddle during the pandemic to coordinate and share information across the systems in which we work. We met for 45 min on Wednesdays between 5:15 and 6 PM. It has been almost three years. Recently, the group agreed to continue meeting indefinitely. This "huddle" is informal, there is no agenda, each member speaks each week about challenges they are facing and can get advice and share ideas. In this way we have built trust, everyone feels informed, and the consistency of these meetings has helped me cope with the stress of running a large, diverse unit. I know I have a team. And they are all great.

Similarly, our research team was meeting daily for a "morning check-in" 9 to 9:30 AM. Everyone was asked, "What's up with you this week?" "What is going on?." Many members of the team were hired during the pandemic and never met the rest of the team in person. For some, it was their first real job. We found this was a good way to start each day and establish and maintain a sense of community. At the end of each day, everyone emailed a summary of what they had worked on that day. We found this kept us all connected and gave everyone a sense of accomplishment.

I am an extrovert; I like connectivity and predictability and it feels good. I am touched that my leadership group feels so connected that they want to continue meeting.

Before the pandemic, huddles like these seemed difficult. During the pandemic, it became a lifeline. The predictability of our huddles meant everyone felt connected and knew there would be someone in the group who could help with a new challenge. The Leaders did not feel alone, and they discovered that their struggles were similar across systems.

Interpersonal bonding also happens when a group shares an intense experience. Going through the “great unknown” together and taking the time to connect creates mutual respect, more humility. People feel less siloed on both a professional and personal level. This can happen in short periods of time if it is predictable. When the work is done, meetings end early if there is nothing more to discuss. Of course, getting the technology to leverage the work is an important “silver lining” of the pandemic. In the “old days,” travel time to meetings got in the way. Now someone can just hop on the call from wherever they are. It is akin to the wisdom that families that eat dinner together three times a week do better.

Dr. Kalet interviewed her close colleague Sondra Zabar, MD, who has been an Affiliate Professor of MCW and the Kern Institute since 2019 and collaborates with the KI Data Science of Medical Education Lab on the DREAM (Database for Research in Education in Academic Medical), measuring professional identity formation in medical students and the Night onCall Project. Dr. Zabar is a Professor of Medicine, Director for the Division of General Internal Medicine and Clinical innovation, Director the Program for Medical Education Innovation and Research (PrMEIR), and Director of the NYSIM/NYU Standardized Patient Program.