



Perspective

No Words Can Describe this Experience

by Michelle Minikel, MD – Bellin Health

Over the past few months I've been asked to be interviewed, and to serve on a panel discussion, and to give a lecture, and to write a piece about what it was like to care for a "disadvantaged" population during a major COVID outbreak in Green Bay. I want to say "yes," but it's hard. I don't usually feel up for the task. I don't know if I can really put to words what this pandemic has been like.

How can I convey the frustration ...

Of seeing the first positive SARS-CoV-2 test result of a patient of mine who works at the JBS meat-packing plant? The very same patient who had asked me a couple of weeks prior for an excusal from work, due to her high-risk conditions? She later informed me she was denied. Having toured the plant and seen the working environment, how can I ever describe what it was like to know, just know, that COVID was going to tear through that plant like a tornado? It wasn't a surprise; we had already seen it happen in multiple plants. But the public health department was powerless to close the plant. I will never know if there is more that I could have done to close it, even if for just a couple of weeks. A couple of weeks that could have perhaps saved a couple of lives.

How can I convey the heart ache ...

Of what it was like to see a once hospitalized COVID-survivor, back to see me in the clinic, whose husband didn't make it, who didn't survive the infection she brought home from work?

Or to see the patient who also blew whistles at her meat packing plant in early March and whose requests to wear a mask were denied? "We matter less to them than the cows," she told me.

Or what it was like to see two of my pediatric patients in clinic and finally meet their premature newborn baby sister, taken from her mom's womb as she died at age 30 of COVID?

How can I convey the anger ...

That the meat packing plants wouldn't close down and instead let the fire rage for days, stoked with bonuses for the employees who did not miss work? Are our hamburgers really that essential?

Or of hearing people decry the springtime Green Bay outbreak as stemming from a lack of education among the Hispanics? Day after day in clinic, I heard about their fears of continuing to work and the sacrifices they were making to protect themselves, and answered their questions about how to best prevent the virus. All while watching hydroxychloroquine be given to them in the hospital, in many cases, even weeks after the CDC stopped recommending it.

Or of watching people in Green Bay, even now, shop without masks and continue go out to restaurants and bars, while our children aren't able to attend school?

No words can describe this experience.

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