

Opinion Piece: *A message to the Community*

By: Dr. Frank Osborn, Interim Chief Medical Officer, *Wellforce Clinically Integrated Network*

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I need your patience and understanding. I need it for my staff and for the 2600 other physicians I represent as the interim CMO of the Wellforce Clinically Integrated Network. I will go one step further and ask this of the medical community as a whole. We appreciate your sympathy, concern, and respect, but right now patience and understanding are required.

If I include my experience in residency and medical school, I have been working in medicine for 27 years. I have seen young patients come into the hospital and die of untreatable AIDs, seen fear over Ebola, weaponized anthrax and SARS/H1N1. Prior to the pandemic we used to just worry about physician burnout. Worrying about one thing seems quaint in our current situation. There was a point in my medical career, due to the lack of someone to share call with, that I was on Obstetrical call for eighteen months straight with only Thursdays off. Using humor to deal with stress, I would jokingly say I can do anything for eighteen months. COVID-19 has been two years, with no clear end in sight. Those eighteen months of OB call seem like a walk in the park in hindsight, as I have never seen what the covid pandemic has brought. The volume of patients that are overwhelming our hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent care clinics, and offices is unprecedented. The lack of staffing from the “great resignation”, burnout, and from COVID-19 itself is unprecedented. We are trying to fight a fire without water. This results in a staff that is left with an ever increasing level of burden and burnout.

The physician offices have call volumes that outstrip our capacity. Calls for testing coordination, medical questions, letters of clearance, and all of our “usual” medical care management is at an impossible volume. Prior to the pandemic we were busy with the “usual” medical care, refills, pre-authorizations, referrals, etc. We still have all of that plus COVID-19 on top. The pandemic has not helped everyone’s mental health, and the amount of treatment we have to provide or coordinate for anxiety and depression is challenging. Mental health services have always been underfunded and with limited availability. The pandemic has only made it worse.

The hospitals, emergency rooms and urgent cares face much the same burden as the offices. With the added problem that they are the last lines of defense. The volume of patients coming for testing or evaluation for COVID-19 is hard to manage, but in addition to that the volume of other medical issues has surged. We really do not know if delayed care is causing this, or something else. Regardless, the volume of these patients along with the

volume of mental health patients and COVID-19 patients is filling our waiting rooms, emergency departments and hospital beds. If this was happening at one hospital, we would be okay. This is happening, however, at a state and national level. Hospitals are unable to transfer patients to higher levels of care if needed. The problem is not just if you come to the hospital with COVID-19. If you come to the hospital due to a motor vehicle accident, heart attack, or stroke, we might not be able to have the needed space for you, nor may we be able to find you a place somewhere else to match your required level of care.

If the volume of patients was the only issue, we might be in a better place, but staffing levels are as low as we have ever seen. The “great resignation” has hit every business sector including medicine. Some sectors have been able to adapt or keep up. But the unique challenges of specific skill sets, regulations/licensing and better opportunities in other sectors of the economy has made staffing impossible within medicine.

Let us make a deal or pact to get us through this pandemic. The medical community, doctors, nurse practitioners, physician’s assistants, nurses, and clinical and clerical staff will keep trying their best and continue offering compassion. You, and society at large will bring patience and understanding when you call or come to our hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent cares and offices. We want to give you the most efficient and complete medical experience that we can, but at the moment we cannot due to the sheer volume and lack of staffing. Taking out your displeasure on the staff will only result in fewer staff, and a bigger challenge in bringing compassion to our work.

Your patience and understanding will help our medical community make it through this pandemic. The medical community's continued compassion and commitment will help you make it through the pandemic. We need each other and we need to keep helping each other.

Thank you.

**Dr. Frank Osborn**

Interim Chief Medical Officer

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