

Experiences of a junior doctor during the COVID-19 pandemic when it all began

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ABSTRACT

Challenges faced by a young doctor recently passed out from medical school and then into a seemingly never-ending wave of the virus that left us breathless

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"Fresh out of medical college and ready to save lives", or at least that's what I thought when I heard that I got the job in the Emergency Department of Patan Hospital which is one of the most reputed hospitals in the country. It had been just few weeks since I completed my internship and the hunger as well as the passion was high, as most doctors have during this stage of their lives. At the time being, life felt as if it had so much to offer me and I was ready to absorb it all, but little did I know what it had in store.

First day into the new hospital which had undoubtedly one of the busiest Emergency Rooms, entering the department and looking around caught me by surprise, everyone in such a rush with so many patients everywhere, with doctors and nurses pacing around the room, the first thing that crossed my mind was "how"? how do they manage? More importantly, how do they remember not to forget what to do?" I mean I had been to the ER of my hospital before, worked as an intern but this was nothing in comparison to what I was witnessing before my eyes. With mixed emotions I asked one of the doctors there that it was my first day of the job and how do I begin to which he replied with a smile in his face "Just wear an apron and get into it".

Three months into it, I could feel the adrenaline rush every time I entered the department to begin my shift. I know we all have a habit of wishing there were less patients to treat so that our workload decreases, but within, I could not lie to myself, because however busy the work was, I loved the thrill, the rush, the pace in my heart every time I was treating a patient or learning something new because at the end of the day, I was making a difference and that feeling is something that you just cannot ignore as it makes you feel alive. However, this was also around the time that the first Covid-19 case in Nepal had been reported in Teku Hospital. As they say, people fear what they don't understand so it was concerning news even though we did not foresee the outcome.

One of the first suspected COVID cases in my hospital, I remember it vividly. I had been assigned to initially assess the patient. We had a room around the back of the ER which was made an isolation room for the patients who suffered from contagious conditions such as Measles and COVID-19. I am not really sure, but I believe I was chosen for this particular patient because only I had one of N-95 masks on. Anyway, as I began my preparation to enter the room, I could feel mixed

emotions running within with doubts in my mind but nevertheless, I wore the Personal Protective Equipment and entered the room and in front of me stood another human being and that's when I realized how much my mind had been wandering prior and it is in fact not so frightening as I had imagined but I cannot deny the feeling was undoubtedly curtailed by the fact that the patient wasn't proven COVID-19 and only had mild Acute Respiratory Illness symptoms and anyway, was later proved to be COVID-19 negative.

Working in one of the first hospitals to initiate early organized and effective measures to face the COVID-19 pandemic was a matter of pride which I doubt any of us recognized fully at that time. A separate fever clinic had been assigned for proven and suspected cases with a designated emergency room which led directly to isolation rooms, COVID positive ward and the COVID ICU in respective floors. We, the emergency doctors being the front-line workers of the hospital, were assigned to this clinic. Then soon came my first COVID-19 positive case. At that period, patients mostly did not present with any symptoms or just mild ones and hence all we had to do was talk to them and fill out a health ministry form for information gathering, contact tracing and such but it also meant that you have to now meet a person who is holding the virus that has shaken the world. This feeling is hard to describe as in one hand the duty and obligation stands to look after the sick so backing out is never an option but on the other hand there are these inevitable thoughts which say "What if I get it? More importantly, what if my family gets it? I am young but my parents are not. Is this really worth it?" But then again, thoughts are always there and that is their nature and ultimately it depends on us if we want to listen to them or not and all of the front liners who fought bravely in this period of pandemic chose not to listen to this and carry on. So then, stood before me a COVID positive young girl, who was frightened to her core. She had been brought in by an ambulance and had come alone. She did not have any symptoms and so all I had to do was ask her a few questions. The questions were all formal but she did confess something particular which took me by heart. She told me that it's not about the disease as she feels fine, but it's about the stigma that she had been facing by her own friends and family which made her feel terrible and scared because it made her question herself and what is this "thing" that she carries that had caused this. But then again, is social stigma really a new thing for us? I remember my Dermatology head of department of my medical college, when

counseling a vitiligo patient had told us that the worst thing about vitiligo is the discrimination people have to face by the society as the disease severity is relatively mild. I couldn't help but feel for the young girl who was so confused, disheartened and was at the same time being interviewed by a doctor wearing an "alien" dress called PPE and was sitting about 3 feet away from her. Anyway, working in this field we develop a certain resistance to emotion which I think grows as we do. However, despite me counseling her about the disease, different grades of it and how the disease can be quite mild, I don't know how much it helped her given the current situation.

In the times to come, we would come across countless number of positive cases. In the beginning it was a nervous situation, but human beings possess an incredible ability to adapt, and so we did. While it started out at 2 meters distance for asymptomatic patients, soon the symptomatic came and not only did they come in speed but also in numbers. Many a times, we would have been alerted in the middle of the night by an ambulance coming from the Terai region (which was the "hot zone") only to find the patient gasping for air and the oxygen levels still low despite the best emergency treatments and ultimately needing ventilators. Of course, majority of the patients had only mild to moderate symptoms but the severe ones were the ones that were most difficult to manage. Young people of my age who were doing well couple of days back, now having difficulty to complete a full sentence due to lack of oxygen. The wards started filling up, the ICU beds were being fully occupied, ventilators were not enough and all this medical knowledge and desire to help stood no ground when you have no bed to treat a patient and for a young doctor to have to refer a sick patient to another hospital for this reason is in

fact very difficult and disheartening. Although this goes against everything we stand for as health care providers, sometimes situations are desperate and hence demand desperate measures and we had to go along with that.

Days went by and soon ambulances lining up outside the fever clinic became a regular picture. Only in the fever clinic we had two junior doctors as well as nurses, helpers, cleaners, cash counter workers in duty in one shift along with two senior supervisors working tirelessly over the 12-hour period. What started out as sympathy for a young girl sitting 3 feet away from me and telling me about how people alienated her due to the disease, now became urgency with patients finding hard to breathe and us doing everything we can to help them do so. Sometime later, the patients decreased slightly in numbers, not because the cases reduced, but other hospitals played their roles in taking in the cases. I had worked a year in the place which initially started out as a place of work but later became too personal to call it just that. Good as well as bad experiences always have a lesson to teach us and hence grow us as a person. The growth that occurred to me in this period taught me to never get demotivated, always pursue what is right and to make a difference when you can and his feeling is something that will not fade in any time to come. There are times when we feel demotivated, when we feel we could have done better, if only we would've known better. In other words this also means that we can do better now as we know better now and this feeling has to keep us going forward. Sometimes when I think about the boy who graduated couple of years back who thought he had it all figured out. Then I realize how little he knew then how much more he had to learn and will have to keep learning his entire life.