

Strangers in a Strange Land

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It seemed almost too easy, agreeing to share reflections on the perceived changes within our hemodialysis unit since the pandemic was declared. After all, many turbulent thoughts have percolated, occasionally making sense, while at other times presenting as disconnected anxieties. I soon realized that the words would not come; perhaps it was all still too close to current and reawakened traumas to be able to coherently contain them. I hope that perhaps a series of photographs might better represent our current experiences.

In March 2020 the world changed. The initial period was filled with panic, of unseen deadly dangers against which we were defenseless. There were barely enough PPE supplies, evoking imagery of martyred clinicians worldwide. Working in the hospital, with its heightened risk of infection, curiously resulted in enhanced containment. Perhaps the 'village' atmosphere of a dialysis unit, with its unique connection of patients and staff established over years, was able to function as a group container. This facilitated the transformation of our individual anxieties while also strengthening the bonds that held the group together. These connections and identities, however, were distorted by layers of masks, shields, and physical distancing, creating barriers to hitherto spontaneous connections. An instinctive comforting touch had to be abandoned midreach.

As the months wear on, fatigue and despair become more prominent. The staff and patients verbalize their personal traumas, of family members on ventilators in ICUs, of children less able to cope, of prolonged separations from loved ones. Sometimes the most tragic stories are shared during brief moments of encounter. Yet throughout this, no matter how unusual the setting or insurmountable the barrier, the human drive to connect and provide support seems to make each day bearable.

What is the optimum safe distance, between the natural tendency to bring comfort and healing seemingly in conflict with concerns of self-preservation?

The face of resiliency

The major burden of care falls on the nurses, who are continuously with the patients, 8 or more hours per day.

Life sustaining connections

A comment by a patient's wife, during rounds:

This memory just came to me when COVID started. I remember when there was the polio epidemic in Canada, 74 years ago. I was 6 years old and I had a best friend who lived down the street. One day she disappeared and we never spoke of her again. Imagine, I haven't thought of her all these years, until now.

Empty corridors, with solitary patients navigating to their dialysis spots, without the opportunity to socialize with other patients or staff.

Public health warnings are present in every direction you look.

In the face of adversity, the human spirit prevails.

At the end of the day, as you leave the hospital, you momentarily enter another world, both internally and externally, filled with wonderment, connectedness and hope.

*All the individuals in the photos above consented to have their photos taken and published online.