

How COVID-19 is affecting us



Heroism is acts of kindness in times of extraordinary need. Never have I experienced the palpable embodiment of this more than during the COVID-19 containment.

The pandemic has left no one untouched. Each day, we face moments like no other we had experienced. We pray for recovery of those afflicted with COVID-19 and the health of our love ones. We eagerly await daily updates from our University and state leadership, as we place our trust in their decisions. Through their every word, statistic, and intonation, we hope to divine when we will return to normality and what that normality will mean for us.

Yet all around me, I see acts of kindness and compassion during this time of extraordinary need. I have witnessed voluntary fund raising to provide personal protective equipment for our frontline health workers (see story on page 2). I am heartened by the neighbor who transported groceries to elderly couples who dread risk of COVID-19 infection. I am inspired by nurses making that extra effort to comfort families who cannot attend to their love ones hospitalized for life-threatening illnesses. Everywhere I turn, I am keenly reminded of Mr. Roger's famous saying, that in crisis, "look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."

Because neurosurgery involves life-threatening emergencies and surgeries that fundamentally impact those qualities that make us human, our faculty continue to serve at the frontline. Despite the menacing threat of COVID-19, each of them has attended to patients who required life-saving surgery. Despite the challenges imposed by COVID-19, our residents and nurses continue their services of magnanimous humanity. Despite the challenges related to COVID-19 containment, our staff remain portraits of exemplary dedication. For me, the most powerful thanks are gratitude offered in silence. And, I would like to pause here to dedicate that silence to our faculty, residents, and staff.

The toll of COVID-19 containment extends beyond health-related anxiety and touches all aspects of our lives. For many, it translates into loss of or altered daily routines, need for added childcare, limited contacts with love ones, and other burdens that add to an already challenging situation. It is my hope that by sharing our experiences, we can better support one another through this hardship. To this end, we have instituted weekly Zoom meetings and daily check-ins calls from the Leadership Council. This communication is crafted with the same intent. Please know that the department will continue to strive to support you during this challenging time.

This hardship will end. The heroism of selfless helpers gives me reasons to believe that our community will emerge from this chapter in human history stronger and more resilient.

I want to thank you again for your dedication and effort. Let us continue to support one another. Stay well.

Warmly,

Clark



See story on page 2 about how the Association of Minnesota Chinese Physicians collected/donated PPE for regional healthcare systems.

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Local organization donates PPE

The Association of Minnesota Chinese Physicians (AMCP) recently donated more than 60,000 pieces of personal protective equipment, such as N95 masks, face shields, and face masks (surgical and medical) to regional healthcare systems. M Health Fairview received 10,000 N95 masks as a result of their work.



Wrote letters, called friends & family

The effort the organization expended to collect all the equipment was phenomenal. They mobilized local media, wrote letters to various organizations/entities and called friends and families. "In less than two weeks' time, hundreds of families responded with overwhelming support, not only from our own state, but from China or other states as well," said Laura Li, president of the group and a neurologist at the M Health Fairview Neurology Clinic in St. Paul.

Dr. Chen, who is a member of the group, was overwhelmed by their generosity. he said that "helpers, such as the AMCP, are what will sustain, nourish, and comfort us."

Family closer than ever before, thankful for frontline employees

COVID has been universally disrupting and unlike anything we've experienced before, so we are all adapting on the go. It's made me rethink priorities and realize how fragile my routines and sense of normalcy were. It's also given me a heightened sense of appreciation for our healthcare colleagues on the frontlines but most importantly, for everyone who is truly essential to keep the lights on in our daily lives, to keep the hospitals and grocery stores open and our cities functioning.

With my patients, there's been mixed feelings. Some telemedicine visits have been a hit with younger patients who dreaded coming to the hospital but find it very amusing to be seeing me on their iPad at home. On the flip side, it's been really difficult to deliver hard news or explain complex procedures. It's just not the same as personally connecting with someone who is struggling.

Our (my husband and I) daily work routines have changed and there's been time for new daily traditions that keep us sane and entertained, like



more cooking, movie nights and board games. Our cats are big fans of the stay-at-home policy! We've tried to keep our exercise routines and play tennis in public parks — it's a great social distancing sport! More personally, our families are in Colombia and Chile and the uncertainty of when we'll see them again has been tough. My mom visited us in early March and had to rush to buy an earlier return ticket for Bogota when we heard the airport was closing. Our families are healthy and we have video-conferenced 4-5 different homes at the same time and plan weekly dinners and happy hours (even a birthday party). In a way, we are more in touch with our parents and siblings in these challenging times and that gives us hope. — Dr. Carolina Sandoval-Garcia

It has made us nimbler

What impact is COVID-19 having on you as a resident?

Obviously, we can't fill all of our elective cases, so the setup is a little bit different in terms of the types of cases and exposure we're getting in our surgical training. It takes us out of the typical grind and how we manage our day-to-day schedule.

How does that make you feel?

We are all anticipating and trying to prepare ourselves for when things do get worse. We're taking things one day at a time.

Are you having to do things differently? Work in a different way?

We're using different protocols, which seem to change every day as we get more data. Whether it's how we intubate or how we manage provider-patient interactions. We've also changed our schedule in case one resident happens to get hit with the virus so we can adjust accordingly. It's made us nimbler. — Dr. Adam Khan, PGY6 Resident



Biking to the lab, counting blessings

Covid-19 for me has meant inconvenience, change in routine, isolation, etc. I also realize how fortunate I am. All around the country, people are dying from this disease and many have had their lives turned upside down. Thousands have lost their jobs. Daily, I count my blessings.

Like most, I am spending a lot of time at home and with family. Having switched our lab focus to Covid-related research, I still am going there to work and read — mostly about neuroplasticity with the hope of expanding our stroke research into this area.

I am trying to get into the habit of biking to work. Who knew it was only 11 miles and took just 15 more minutes than driving? Since the COVID outbreak, I think I have biked several hundred miles.

I am absolutely amazed at our ability to adapt. It truly is what makes us human. All around me, I see people who have changed their lives in just a matter of days and are now adjusted to a new normal. My family and I are similarly adjusted to life at home, school and working from home, 5:30 dinner times and exercising together. In some ways, this time has enabled me to reflect on what truly is important in life. — Dr. Andy Grande (pictured above with his kids, Nora and Walker)



Balancing patients with family — and another baby on the way

I was rotating through pediatric neurosurgery when the COVID-19 crisis began. To reduce potential spread of infection, a plan was devised to combine adult and pediatric services so there would be one junior and one senior neurosurgery resident covering shifts.

This way, if a team was exposed to COVID-19, we would be able to contain the disease and have other residents available to continue caring for our patients. Fortunately, none of the resident providers have yet been diagnosed with COVID-19, but it is reassuring to know that we have a safety valve already in place for providers and most importantly, for our patients.

Working during this crisis while also being 37 weeks pregnant and a mother of a two-year-old daughter has been interesting, to say the least. Every day that I leave for work, I wonder if I will be able to successfully keep both my patients and my family safe. Every day that I come home from work, I quickly remove all garments worn in the hospital while still in my garage, and then run (as fast as a 37-week pregnant woman can) to the shower before I see my husband and daughter.

We practice careful hand washing and wear masks religiously at the hospital. We social distance. We take all necessary precautions. And still, there is always that ever-looming hint of fear in the background. Will all of this be enough? For my patients? My family? What will the world look like for my unborn baby after this is over?

My family and I have found different ways to continue enjoying life and creating a positive atmosphere for our daughter. For family birthdays and celebrations, we have frequently participated in electronic parties. During one, we connected with up to 30 families, spanning from California to Pennsylvania!

We also have gone on more walks and bike rides than we have in our entire lives! Working from home, it has been comforting to know that we have a little assistant nearby who is always ready and willing to give her two cents about the matter at hand. —Dr. Lauren Sand, PGY5 resident



Finding ways to stay positive

To cope with COVID19, I am trying to keep myself busy and entertained. I am still working



remotely, which has been quite an adjustment. I try to get outside when I can (let's hope for no more snow!), catch up on my favorite shows on Netflix and Hulu, and keep my brain as active as possible. I also am gearing up to apply to medical school in the next month, so there's a lot of uncertainty right now in terms of taking the MCAT, submitting applications, etc.

I am finding ways to stay positive during this time. I am continuously impressed by the leadership team here at UMN — with daily updates, keeping everyone informed, and most importantly, making sure our patients are safe and remain healthy. I know we are in good hands and am very proud to be a Minnesotan in times like these. — Jake Hanson

Aside from several neurosurgery projects, I have been gardening (reseeding my lawn with turf alternatives, a mix of grasses and low-growing perennials that bees are said to like), knitting (see below), organizing my drawers, and spending time with my mom! — Deb Fellows



It changed how I approach everything

It means I am for better or worse experiencing an event that has an enormous impact on the human race. It is something that affects all of us in the whole world, crossing all boundaries. It is also something historical – a similar event hasn't happened for more than 100 years.



It means a change in how I approach everything from work, starting from the drive in, entering and leaving the hospital, and driving home. Little things like picking up milk or getting gas now require more thought.

My older son is studying at Berkeley and cannot come home. I miss him and cannot visit him. My younger son likes to “climb,” and all the gyms are closed. Unfortunately, he is playing too many video games as a result. — Dr. Cornelius Lam

Growing backlog of patients, trying to keep normal hours

To me, the COVID-19 pandemic means having to live every part of life – work and personal – differently. I appreciate things that I used to take for granted (the park, taking a walk outside in a crowded place, sitting in a coffee shop or restaurant). I deeply miss family and other people I love who do not live close by.

This has had huge impacts on our lives as surgeons. Elective and non-urgent surgical cases have been postponed. We are only able to do emergency and urgent cases. When we do, family members are often not present to be with their loved ones before and after surgery. Most of our clinics are now virtual (video or sometimes telephone) and for those who require exams, they are often being put off. For me, there are more telephone or Zoom meetings than ever. In addition to service line meetings, there are COVID-19-specific calls and updates. These are accompanied by COVID-specific work that was at first

directed at reorganizing and restructuring to find ways to continue work in the face of COVID-19

(virtual clinics, precautions, masking, new rules and procedures, changes in procedures, financial issues, etc.) and will soon be focused on addressing the growing backlog of cases and clinic patients.

Personally, it creates challenges with children home from school, competing for computers and WIFI access, the ability to exercise and socialize. Trying to maintain structure. Keeping the same work schedule as before. The need to take short breaks away from the screen (setting a timer to do so). Focusing on one thing at a time. Connecting virtually with family and other people I care about at night. — Dr. Dan Guillaume



Seeing all the teamwork, spending time with family

Covid19 has been both a time of uncertainty and a time when people have come together. I have seen amazing things — nurses compassionately caring for patients, physicians coming together to treat patients the best we know how. Our clinical team of dedicated residents and nurse practitioners have handled demanding schedules and increased responsibility with their typical quiet confidence and poise. Our research lab has been working from a distance to design innovative new ways to treat patients with skull base diseases. It has been a source of great joy to see all the teamwork.

It has also been nice being able to spend a bit more time with our daughters, watching them grow and explore. It's fun to watch our almost 3-year-old get the hang of her balance bike, and our 14-month old take her first steps. We hike through trails near our house. Our girls have mastered the art of the 20-second hand wash and have enjoyed FaceTiming our families on both coasts.

Explaining to our kids why we cannot go see grandma and grandpa or our friends at school, or play at the park has been an adjustment. My wife Emma and I have been trying to still have our date nights. We enjoy having family take-out and movie night on Fridays or Saturdays, although I think there is such a thing as watching *Frozen* and *Moana* too many times. In our field, it can sometimes be difficult to slow down, so it has been really great to get to explore the joys of the world through my children's eyes, like seeing their faces light up when I tell them the “salad” they made in their toy kitchen was delicious. — Dr. Andrew Venteicher



Making adjustments, spending time with family, unpacking hobbies



Clinically, it has brought everything to a halt. As you can imagine, most neuromodulation and movement disorder surgeries would be considered elective, as many patients have been dealing with their disease for a long time. My patient population is also at higher risk for Covid-19-related morbidity and mortality given their age.

Academically, there are challenges related to the neurosurgery residency program. For example, our residents are caring for patients and protective mechanisms must be in place for their safety. In addition, there are daily updates and announcements as it relates to the residents coming from Fairview, the University, and Graduate Medical Education. The situation is also having an impact on current residents' academic activity, as well as on incoming interns and future applicants.

Like everyone, my days are filled with Zoom meetings, one after another. On the bright side, there is more time to spend on my research projects with more time to think and write. That has been positive.

Personally, I have been able to spend more time with my family — my wife, Hyun, daughter Rachel and son Christopher (both are in college). My wife and I like to travel but that's definitely not possible these days (the photo is from a pre-COVID trip to NYC this past winter). I am glad that we are all safe and are taking the stay-at-home situation well.

The silver lining to all this is that I can spend more time with my family and have more time to myself. Having dinner together has been refreshing, as I am not getting home late. I can catch up on yard work and house cleaning. I have been able to plant and care for new houseplants. I finally unpacked my scale model building supplies and created a small corner in the basement for them. I'm spending a couple of hours a week working on something that I had put away for more than 10 years! — Dr. Michael Park

Managing dual careers, plus home schooling and childcare



COVID-19 has meant unprecedented change — in the way we live, work and think about healthcare. It's hard to say exactly what it means to us right now since we're still trying to figure how it affects us all and how to manage on a daily basis.

It has affected my life in many ways. At work, I'm adjusting to minimal operative time, clinic visits completely conducted over the phone or via video. At home, we're adjusting to having to

home school my kindergartner, manage my wife's and my career demands, while also trying to take care of both kids simultaneously.

We're adjusting as well as we can. My wife and I generally try to split the day in half so she can while I take care of home schooling/childcare and then we switch responsibilities. We've been taking walks with the kids and playing outside as much as we can together. I've also been running a lot, which helps clear my mind, I'm able to get an hour or so alone and it has the side benefit of getting in better shape. I always feel much better after running. — Dr. Bob McGovern

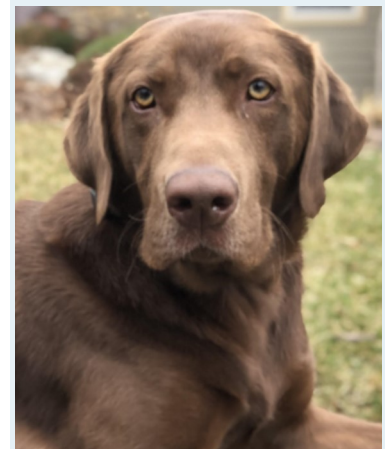
New co-worker corner



Former resident Dr. Akshay Gupta's new co-worker is adorable!



Nicole Niesen-Falk's new co-workers are a little intense.



Dr. Grande's co-worker, Nurdy, is very dignified. Most of the time.