

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Surviving a pandemic

Sr. Director: I vividly remember how it all began; the news was confusing, unclear, there was a mix of fear and chaos due to the uncertainty of what was happening. Television was a constant flow of information. The pandemic transformed my life and work in ways I had never imagined. I lived alone, afraid of infecting my family, and video calls with my parents, sister, partner, and friends were a lifeline for me. Seeing their faces through the screen was an energy boost, but at the same time, I felt nostalgic for not being able to hug them. Nevertheless, I preferred to protect them, as the idea of bringing the virus home and infecting them terrified me.

The hospital became my second home since the virus entered my life. Going to work was a way to share stories, laughter, and sometimes tears with my colleagues. We supported each other, knowing that only we, who were fighting against the enemy, were capable of understanding the extent of the situation. At a time when all of Spain was locked down at home, I felt "fortunate" to be able to go out and interact with people in my workplace.

As an emergency nurse, I was on the front line of the battle, facing the unknown. I had endless days of standing, filled with challenges, with a new protocol every day to confront the virus. Going to work became a ritual; personal protective equipment (PPE) was our best shield, and every change of gloves or mask had to be done with extreme care to protect patients and avoid infecting ourselves.

Emergency triage was conducted outside the hospital in tents set up for that purpose. I still remember the heat I endured in the PPE that summer of 2019. I was dehydrated, unable to drink, and when I took off the suit, I felt moisture all over my body that soaked through to my bones. It was an unpleasant sensation, but like many others, I learned to adapt.

In winter, the nights were very cold and long in that makeshift setup. I appreciated being able to take off the PPE during my break, go inside, have a hot coffee, and stretch my legs a bit, even if it was just for 20 minutes.

The first time I received a patient with suspected COVID-19 in the emergency room, I felt a mixture of fear and determination. The seriousness of the problem was reflected in their eyes, and I, with my PPE, was their only reference amidst such chaos. I felt an enormous responsibility while working, giving my best and providing care under circumstances I had never experienced before.

The shortage of supplies, lack of personnel, and constant emotional burden left me desperate and made me think I couldn't go on. As a nurse, I never imagined having to face a battle against such a cruel enemy. I distinctly remember the times when we had to reuse masks and improvise protective suits with garbage bags. We were fighting an enemy without the necessary tools.

Throughout the months, I faced the loss of some patients; it was a mixture of physical and emotional exhaustion for not being able to save them all. The first time I lost a patient to COVID-19, I felt a knot in my stomach. At that moment, I realized that despite efforts and protective measures, we couldn't always win the battle.

Added to this was the need to decide who should receive immediate attention and who should wait. We faced a daily ethical dilemma that weighed on my conscience and followed me home after finishing my shift, although I understood the necessity. Ethics and reality clashed, and I was in the center of that dilemma, trying to maintain my integrity as a nurse.

The applause from people at 8 o'clock in the evening and the singing of "I Will Resist" together were a boost to gather strength and keep going. We were heroes to society. Even exhausted, I found comfort in those moments and reminded myself why I chose to be a nurse; I wanted to help people.

As the months passed, the hope of a new vaccine's arrival mingled with accumulated fatigue. Change was possible in the future, but the reality of the virus continued to accompany us in our daily lives. Vaccination provided that hope, but we knew there was a long way to go before returning to the normality we lived before the pandemic.

The vaccine finally arrived, and the vaccination campaign began with the hope that it would be the first step towards the end of this pandemic that had taken so many lives in its path. I was one of the first who didn't think twice and decided to get vaccinated as soon as healthcare personnel were given the opportunity.

Little by little, we entered a "new normal," and masks were removed in some places; people began to go out after months of confinement, and with caution, they resumed social contact with family and friends. I still resisted returning to normal life because, despite the situation improving, I continued to work in contact with the virus, and that fear of endangering my family still existed for me. When I met with them, I kept my distance and didn't take off my mask. I might have seemed paranoid, but I felt much safer.

After the pandemic, I reflected a lot and was surprised by the strength I have and didn't know I possessed. Adversities have tested me, and I've acquired a character that no other experience would have provided. There were moments of despair and feeling like I couldn't go on, but also others where I felt proud to be on that front line where I could help others and feel useful to humanity.

At the end of each work shift, I removed my mask and PPE and felt that, although the challenges were many, I had the resilience to push forward and come back the next day to keep fighting. As we reached that "new normal," I hoped that society would value their health and our work more, the importance of empathy and solidarity in such crucial moments. I wished they had learned something from everything we had experienced.

The pandemic has left scars, changed my life and profession, but it hasn't taken away my desire to continue working every day in what I love. I wouldn't want to go through a similar situation again, but if I had to, I'm sure I'm prepared to face it.

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