



## We Never Know

It's been a long nine months in this pandemic. All of us who work in healthcare have especially felt the burden of being "essential workers." When my two sons were abruptly forced to move to an all-virtual format of school in March, my family was forced to adapt to the change. Fortunately, my husband had already been ordered to work from home in his busy engineering job. I knew our kids had a parent at home and they are old enough (4th and 7th grade) to not need constant supervision. Our situation was much better than many other families. I was proud to be working in the healthcare field and to be able to help my patients and co-workers through this challenging time. But I also felt this pull to be home with my children as they navigated this new reality of on-line school, mostly alone. There were long days where I would come home from working nine hours and then need to help my youngest son complete his assignments for several more hours. I leaned on my close sisterhood of working moms to find some sanity in this chaotic new world. But they could not exactly relate to my situation as all of them had jobs that they were able to do from home.

During this time, I leaned on the support of my colleagues at work more than ever. I learned that a fellow hospital-based PA was having a much more challenging time. Her husband is also a PA in the emergency department. Their daughter was three and their daycare had closed. In a loss of options for childcare, her loving parents had driven from Michigan to live with them and provide childcare for an indefinite amount of time. Several nurses told me stories of how their elderly parents were risking exposure to them to provide childcare to their young grandchildren. I felt bonded to this community of hard-working mothers who were making challenging family decisions to honor their commitment to their profession.

The summer brought easier times with the lift of the stay-at-home order. The number of Covid patients in our hospital was improving. We were able to designate only one floor for Covid patients and there were very few Covid patients in our ICU. I spent some time talking to Heather, the unit secretary on the designated Covid floor. She stayed upbeat and positive, excited that her oldest daughter had just gotten her driver's license. She was pregnant with her youngest daughter while I was pregnant with my first child. We had been forever bonded by this experience and loved to share stories about our kids. In the fall we started to see an increase in our Covid admissions again. Fortunately, my attending cardiologists made the decision to limit provider exposure to these patients and were rounding on them exclusively. I did not round on that floor or see Heather for many weeks. Last week I was shocked to learn that Heather had died, at the age of 43. I immediately was concerned that she had contracted Covid working on that floor. What else could suddenly have taken her life after I had just seen her looking so healthy? But I soon learned that Heather had been diagnosed with inflammatory breast cancer over the summer of 2020. Shortly after I had last seen her, she became too ill to work and had taken medical leave. The cancer became metastatic and she had chosen hospice care after her body stopped responding to treatment. Heather had been the unit secretary on that floor for the past twelve years. She was woven deeply into the fabric of our hospital family and her loss has been painful for us all. This has been a challenging year for healthcare workers on so many levels. I reflected on what meaning Heather's death would serve for me. Her death has reminded me that life is short and that many other stories are going on in the background of this pandemic. We never know when our time will be up. We never know when our conversation with someone will be the last time we will talk to them. In this time of political unrest, financial and emotional strain, varied views on how to handle the pandemic and many other challenges we often feel frustrated. But through this exasperation we must remember that everyone has some battle you likely don't know about. We need to do our best not to pass judgement on others. We often don't have all the information and as humans and healthcare workers, we certainly don't have all the answers. What we can do is make it our mission to spread kindness. That will always be the right answer and you will never know how far your words will go to help to heal someone's troubled heart.

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