

Answering the Call

Category: COVID-19

written by Mimi Emig | April 28, 2020

When the pandemic first arrived in the U.S., I felt a familiar pull. Public health emergency? Epidemiology? I'd worked for decades as an infectious diseases doctor. This was right up my alley: Sign me up!

Dr. Suzanne Koven wrote a "Perspective" piece in the April 13, 2020, *New England Journal of Medicine* titled "They Call Us and We Go." In it, she describes her feelings when she was called to see coronavirus patients. She's an older physician, and therefore at higher risk of complications if she becomes ill. She still answered the call, quoting Albert Camus: "For the moment I know this: there are sick people and they need curing."

But reality quickly set in for me, when a colleague and friend told me, "Don't you dare even think about returning to practice!" She was right. I'd retired six years ago after developing severe health problems. I take medication nine times a day. I didn't renew my medical license a couple years ago, knowing I'd never be able to return to patient care. My illnesses put me at high risk for death if I get COVID.

Still, in the middle of a pandemic, I couldn't help feeling I was failing my friends if I wasn't joining them on the front lines. Coronavirus patients are now filling their hospitals. This crisis is unlike anything they've seen in their careers. Their own health is threatened as they attend to the care of others; from around the world, reports roll in of health-care workers dying of COVID. My colleagues began to experience heartbreak and psychological trauma as their patients died, isolated from their loved ones.

And I began to receive phone calls at all hours from my colleagues. My friends who *are* on the front lines started to reach out to me. I heard their fatigue, anger, and fear. Their compassion for their patients and their worry for their families permeated our conversations.

I'd taught many of these physicians during their training. *What can I possibly offer them?* I thought. My role has evolved. I cannot be on the front lines. I must remain sequestered, physically isolated until a vaccine is available.

But I now realize that I can answer a different call. I can be a sounding board, a mentor, a friend to those on the front lines. I can check in on them, knowing the stress they're under. I can listen, console, and offer advice.

"I hear you," I tell them. "I'm here for you."

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