

Paying My Debt to Ireland

Category: COVID-19

written by Asma Fazal | April 28, 2020

After completing my master's at the University of Toronto in 2019, I decided to travel to Ireland, as it's my second home and has made me what I am today—a pediatrician. Shortly after my arrival, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The Medical Council of Ireland contacted all registered doctors in the country and asked us to join the fight during the crisis. The hashtag “#oncallforireland” began to trend on social media. It was the time to pay back my debt to Ireland. I answered the call and joined Children's Health Ireland as a pediatrician.

But as the infection spread, everything began to change rapidly. The staff of our pediatric ICU was re-deployed to adult hospitals. Medical teams are now skeletal. We started practicing social distancing. Staying apart from the colleagues with whom I used to rub shoulders is difficult for me, because I love to be around people.

Hospital guidelines are modified by the hour. We are asked to treat any child with a fever and/or symptoms of a cold as a suspected COVID-19 case. This protocol has challenges. For example, in pediatrics, we never wear even a white coat lest it frighten the children; but now I have to wear full PPE to see any child with possible COVID symptoms. It makes me uncomfortable to see the fright on children's faces and the anxiety in parents' eyes due to my outfit.

I am devastated that this pandemic is affecting the mental health of children. The fact that I can't hold a stressed mother and console her is painful for me. Doing ward rounds is a challenge because it's impossible to maintain the recommended physical distance. Many of my colleagues have gotten the infection as a result—but have thankfully recovered.

The looming fear of coming down with COVID-19 is making me paranoid, because I have a family. What if I infect *them*? These worries occupy my mind, but my professional obligation is keeping me focused.

Every successful resuscitation of a sick child reminds me of my commitment to them. We have treated a lot of COVID-19 cases. I am getting better at keeping myself calm and collected amidst the uncertainty about my patients' recovery and survival, about my own well-being. I am learning to show compassion without physical touch. This pandemic has given me the opportunity to do my best, to contribute to this fight, and serve to humanity during these unprecedented times.

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