

Déjà vu all over again

Category: Omicron

written by Pam Adelstein | January 6, 2022

The news is full of reports about the havoc omicron is wreaking on our health-care system. But last week I was on vacation, and as I sipped my daily latte and strolled on the beach, COVID-19 seemed like a distant memory. As soon as I checked my work email after getting back, however, my vacation bliss shattered—boom!

Many dear colleagues were sick with COVID. Boosted, PPE-wearing friends were unable to sleep or get comfortable. Patients needed to be cancelled constantly. For the colleagues still able to cover for those out sick, the work multiplied exponentially.

Our patient portal was overflowing with incoming messages. The subject lines read: “I have COVID.” “Sick with COVID.” “I am positive.” Patients were full of questions: what to do, whether to retest, how to handle household contacts, whether they could have a doctor’s note for work, and on and on. I felt so disheartened. And these are mostly vaccinated folks.

Meanwhile, close to half the patients tested at our clinic have been positive for COVID. Most are not severely ill, but all need evaluation and care. Patient numbers and wait times are unprecedented. We’ve implemented emergency measures to compensate for staff absenteeism and the high census. Our providers, nurses, and staff are exhausted and burnt out. Still, they flex as needed—creating new protocols in real time and pivoting as the situation evolves.

Because of high COVID rates, there are fewer appointments available for primary-care patients and those without acute respiratory symptoms. Last night, a patient of mine was increasingly short of breath when walking and had an irregular heartbeat and an abnormal EKG. When I called the ER to tell them to expect this patient, they were too slammed with COVID to even take my call. Fortunately, the patient was admitted and is receiving life-saving care.

Our world has once again become unpredictable, just as in early 2020. We in health care flash back to the early days of the pandemic, when we reported for duty amid the unknown, acting and reacting. We remember those days of crisis on a cellular level, a visceral level. We console ourselves by saying that this time is different—we have tests, vaccines, medications, experience. But we are wearier; hope is a complicated thing.

Some people say getting COVID is no big deal—it’s like a cold. For those of us in health care, the ripple effects of the “no big deal” are gigantic.

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