

# A Lonely Death During a Pandemic

Category: Alone

written by Zohar Lederman | June 2, 2023

He was a spy, or so we thought. He had traveled the world, spoke eight languages fluently, and knew much more about world affairs than your average Joe. He was a typical COVID patient—jolly, no apparent breathing difficulties, just a slight fever three days ago and a positive test. He came to the emergency department (ED) because he had a blood oxygen saturation reading of 88% at home, later determined to be 90% in the ED. We also saw the much-feared blurry white patches on his chest X-ray.

My jolly patient was 91 years young, so at more than average risk, even though he was vaccinated; sometimes COVID doesn't care.

"Any family? Someone you want to talk with?" I asked him, wishing I had the mental energy right then to hear more about his life. "No. Never had a family. Going through the Holocaust, and experiencing other things in my life, I became pessimistic about humanity. I always knew that it might happen again, so I never wanted to have a family." As someone who studies loneliness and genocides, I had too many things to say, so I said nothing. I admitted him, making a mental note to visit him later on the COVID ward.

"Hey," I said to a colleague on the COVID ward several days later, "I admitted a really interesting patient five days ago. Is he still there? I haven't been able to visit him yet, but I was planning to go after my shift today."

My colleague knew exactly who I was referring to: "He passed away this morning. His sats had been dropping since yesterday and reached sub-70% by early morning. He knew what was going on. We had been spending time with him, sitting around his bed and conversing in Russian, Hebrew, and English. He would point at the monitor and note that his sats were going down. He had incredible stories. We are sure he was a spy." She noticed that I paused, struggling to hold back a tear that was threatening to drop. She said she was sorry and left the room.

I failed my jolly patient by not visiting him, and I failed myself. Perhaps I didn't visit because I didn't have time. Perhaps I couldn't stand being in the hospital and on the COVID ward if I didn't absolutely have to. Or perhaps I was afraid to look into my own future, dying a lonely death during a pandemic.

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