

My name is Sara, and I am a twenty-one-year-old emergency room patient care technician in New Jersey that has survived the petrifying effects of the coronavirus. I am not a nurse or a doctor, so I was not able to administer medications or be a part of the direct treatment plan of these patients, but had to endure some intense and emotional work during my eight to twelve hour shifts as well. From walking through the double doors at six fifty-five A.M, to walking to the break room to settle in and see lifeless bodies on stretchers passing by me to go to the morgue or refrigerated truck are images that I will never forget. Everyone in healthcare has the stereotype of being able to handle anything and everything, but this was a once in a life time event for some healthcare providers, including myself with the age I am at.

I would walk into huddle in the beginning of my shift to receive my assignment for the day, and I quickly came to learn that not one day was going to be a breeze. The first question or statement some nurses would give me as I walked onto the floor were, "Can you please clean and prepare the patient in room __# for the morgue?" Or, "Adult Code Team ER," and I would have to respond to a cardiac arrest in full personal protective equipment: (gowns, goggles, N 95 masks, shields, and anything else that was provided to us to just attempt to save someone's life for a short amount of time because our exposure to those patients were supposed to be limited for our safety. It would be one after another, and I knew I was used to seeing deceased and critically ill bodies just from being in healthcare since I was sixteen years old, but nothing ever prepared me for a time in history like this.

It was a twelve-hour shift and I was working a pediatric tent that was isolated from the rooms that were now for COVID-19 patients inside the emergency room. If only I knew how I was going to feel by the last ten minutes of that shift, I most likely would not have picked up the extra shift, being a per diem employee. I was asked to come inside and help out in the pediatric ER, and an hour into being in that unit, I over heard "Adult code team, emergency room." I was not sure how well staffed the oncoming nightshift was since it was not my regular working hours, so I told the nurse I was working with, I would go assist. I gowned up outside of the room while one of my coworkers was performing cardiopulmonary resuscitation on this fairly young adult, and she asked me to take over compressions. I place my hands on his chest, and compress and work with the team for approximately what felt like hours, but was only less than fifteen minutes. Unfortunately, his vital signs and electrical activity in his heart was not compatible with life, so the doctor said it was time to call the time of death on this patient, and he thanked us for all of our hard work and efforts to save this individual.

Walking away to the critical care sinks to clean up, taking my mask off for a breath of air as I was covered in sweat and body fluids, I realized how bad COVID was becoming. I walked back into the pediatric ER being the last ten minutes of my shift, and told the nurse I was working with, "We couldn't save him, I need to go home now," with tears nearly falling from my eyes and still out of breath. I sat in my car in the dark hours of the night for a good twenty minutes before I was able to drive away from the hospital, I listened to a song, and cried, realizing these individual human beings were suffering and dying alone, no one is there to hold their hand, and I, along with my coworkers were the last person they would see or even sense while alive. That feeling became so realistic, and so painful, that I became stressed and terrified to go to work every day.

I would come home from work every single day, take all my scrubs off, disinfect the areas around me that I had contacted, including my own car, then I would shower and then go to sleep. I was to the point of skipping meals, because I was extremely drained from each day, and I could only imagine how my fellow nurses and doctors had been feeling, when they were the ones

making the life and death decisions and intervening. It had come to the point, I came home one day, and sat down in the living room with my mother. I could not fight this conversation any longer, I simply said, "What do you want done if you become critically ill with COVID-19?" and "This is what I want done, depending on the severity of my condition." It was the hardest conversation I ever had to have with a parent, worse than telling them when I had done something wrong as a child. I saw the pain in her eyes and the tears start to form, and I knew she did not want to even have this conversation with her twenty-one-year-old daughter who was just beginning her life, but it had to happen. I can back up many of my coworkers or any healthcare providers that were affected by the pandemic, that this was something that at least once has went through their mind, but here is something amazing.

With all of the death, all of the suffering, and all of the sadness and pain that myself and coworkers have seen, we survived COVID-19. Yes, there may be a second wave and maybe even a third with the flu season approaching, but at least we know how to support each other, wipe each other's tears, and although not all the time physically, but in spirit hold the hands of the dying if their loved ones cannot be with them.

I truly do believe because of this pandemic, from housekeeping to the highest and most respectable doctors, it has changed our lives and has brought us insight of how precious life is. One hour a chest x-ray can look normal, two hours later, the COVID could not be more visible and threatening to life, and then the conversation with a healthy and conscious forty-year-old or seventy-year-old about going on a ventilator has to occur.

This time in 2020 has definitely been horrific, but I feel as an individual healthcare provider and future nurse, (hopefully emergency room nursing), I have seen and learned from experience, and can only learn more as time passes by, even with no pandemic at site. Every healthcare provider has value and has a role as being part of patient care, and with the virus, no one is better than another, we are equal and working together as a team, open to suggestions, and supporting decision making, as well as providing compassionate care for the patients.