

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNT AND THE NEW NORMAL AS I SEE IT

COVID-19 FROM THE EYES OF AN ANESTHESIOLOGY STUDENT:

When Wuhan city, entered the headlines of almost all news world, I entered my final year of residency in anesthesiology. Little did I know that my outlook about my profession would change. With rapid spread of Covid-19 and soon this becoming a pandemic, the fear induced by Corona virus and ignorance about its pathogenesis made the situation worse for many countries. Being a student in one such country, all I could understand was panic around me and challenges to be faced. My routine was shattered and I was called for bizarre duties which frightened me. Covid-19 occupied all most all my learning process. Even if I tried escaping its bear hug, by browsing through webinars, it was my beloved friend Covid again.

I became the frontline warrior right from managing patients posted for surgery to managing respiratory failures in ICU. The demise of 5 anesthesiologists, including senior anesthesiologist Dr. Asheem Gupta and a fellow resident from Andhra Pradesh created havoc in my life. With only 55,000 anesthesiologists in the country, COVID -19 slowly started to take toll on me despite my training. Though I wept inside, I learnt all my life lessons in just 3 months more than what I had learnt in 10 years of my med school life.

“Learning is experience.

Everything else is just an information.”

- *Albert Einstein*

PRESENT DAY BEWILDERMENT:

With surging of cases for surgery, identification and isolation of positive cases remained more challenging as 30% RT-PCR gave false negative results. Every time I saw a patient my eyes were into his swab result before his basic investigations. With so much of uncertainty, it became more imperative to customize and rehearse the anesthetic plan in my mind and exercise maximum precaution possible. Throughout my training I always thought I was accountable for patient's life, but for the first time in my life it struck me that my responsibilities also included my life and that of people around me.

"To do or not to do"

was the question, not an easy task ahead of me.

NEED FOR NEWER ASSESEMENT PROTOCOLS:

First thing I learnt in my training was to assess a patient for surgery. It was always rewarding to comfort and counsel the patient before surgery. It was the only time my patient would see my full identity and personality. I was so obsessed with grading and indices in assessing the patient and always thought that it would help me intraoperatively in managing the patient.

Never had I thought that I would be dressed in a PPE which limited my mobility and field of vision. Smiling, one of the easiest forms of communication was no longer an option. When I startled even the more mature adults with my awful attire, assessing a child was out of the question. When the whole world is brought together through digital screens, may be this is the high time to devise 'VIRTUAL ASSESSMENT' protocols and guidelines to assess the patients with less discomfort.

TECHNIQUES- CHANGES & CHALLENGES:

I always premedicated the patient in the preoperative room which would alleviate patient's anxiety, but now do I have the liberty to contaminate two rooms was the question I asked myself. Transferring a patient which was never a problem seemed a Himalayan task for me. I had to transport my patients through a complex course. When I entered the operation theatre I was greeted by a 'Runner', a trained assistant whom I couldn't recognize much with his PPE on, who would fetch me unanticipated equipment when needed, which made me realize how spoiled I was before, with the luxury of multiple gadgets. With aerosol box in place, intubation was never like before; a well-coordinated and rehearsed plan became key in managing the airway. I had to don PPE even when performing block to respond and to help during conversion to General Anesthesia, when surgery is already halfway. With limited resources available, somehow Covid-19 taught me to feel fortunate with what I have.

THE MIME GAME:

"The single biggest problem in communication is

The Illusion that it has taken place"

-George Bernard Shaw

With many years of communication skill training, I realized that what I have trained never translated well through my PPE. I had to master a new dialect to communicate with our team during crisis. Never thought that a virus would teach me a new language. I was trained about a very new ABC: **Attend Mindfully, Behave Calmly, Communicate Clearly**: as an approach to overcome the barrier. Now my new favorite pastime is playing mime with my team.

THE NEW ERA: 2020 AC (AFTER COVID)

Covid is not the first virus and definitely will not be the last to haunt us. I presume it is time to change and adapt ourselves to the new normal as indicated below.

- Making regional anesthesia our priority which will break the chain of spread. As Albert Einstein said, “*with every crisis there lies an opportunity*”, it is time to showcase the safety and flexibility of regional anesthesia as the way forward.
- Learn to smile through PPE.
- Make all documents digital to avoid infection spread through paper.
- Teach newer technique for intubation through aerosol box right from the first day of training.
- Communicate through actions with no words.
- And more importantly, keep our heads strong as we are not *‘Doctors of nerves but Doctors with nerves of Steel’*.

CONCLUSION:

“It is not the strongest or the most intelligent who will survive.

But those who can best manage change”.

-Charles Darwin

Anesthesia is the specialty of medicine which kept itself changing and emerged successful in all challenging times till now. We, Anesthesiologist are no longer the ‘Forgotten doctors’. World has now slowly and definitely started realising our valuable and essential role in pandemic. With the beginning of this new era, as a student, it is important for not only me but all of us to be mentally prepared. nCov-19 may not be a big name after a century or we might

have some other bug invading us, but the knowledge gained through this pandemic will definitely guide us in future, and **we are sure to emerge as a much more resilient and efficient species in this world.**

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