

By Anonymous

Employee: I remember hearing of vague whispers of a new virus, one with a high mortality rate, one that was not controlled, one that China was denying. I was a pathology extern on Transfusion Medicine at the time, spending day-to-day with patients and afternoons with my resident, an intern; writing notes, making plans, and discussing life, we lived blissfully unaware of what was to come. We laughed about the ridiculousness of the virus, and he made plans to visit his family in the middle east in the coming months.

When I started my autopsy rotation the next month, the world was entering into chaos around us. There was an air of uncertainty about proceedings in the hospital. We were fortunate to have begun switching to CAPRs in January, a complete coincidence that would soon reveal itself as an extraordinary fortune. As an extern, we received instructions not to work with any decedent that had COVID. The decedent care specialists began trying out new techniques, using towels around the bone saws to experiment with minimizing aerosolizing procedures when removing ribs and when removing the skull. Knowing what we know now, this was likely futile.

I remember the first patient we tested for COVID, an elderly gentleman found down at home, believed to have died from a pneumonia. We were working around the body, carrying on as we did, when a phone call came into the room – instructions to test the patient for COVID. At the time none of us knew what this would entail, the world was only weeks away from being all too familiar with the process. After phone calls back and forth with the microbiology lab, the man was tested. He was negative – we would only find out more than a week later.

When the email was sent out to medical students hospital-wide with instructions to leave the hospital and not to return, lives for us as externs did not immediately change. As employees of the hospital, we gained an exception and were allowed to continue operating. Shortly thereafter, however, we were forced to leave our autopsy rotation for fear of PPE shortages. This only lasted a short while for me, however, because I was nearly 9 months pregnant.

Patient: Not much was known about COVID and pregnancy. Some thought it was safe. Others thought pregnancy led to a higher risk of severe complications from the virus. I was left to google, cautiously optimistic the entire time. My pregnancy was complicated by a small defect with the umbilical cord that resulted in weekly non-stress tests and ultrasounds. This unfortunately meant being exposed to the medical world far more than one would care to be in the start of a pandemic. Besides masks and screenings, however, life did not seem to change too much as a patient, until the restrictions began to be implemented. Two visitors fell to one visitor and there were rumors of no visitors. I heard stories of women giving birth in NYC without their partners at their side and I feared my husband wouldn't be able to join me. My daughter arrived on March 25, among a world of uncertainty and turmoil. I was thankful that our hospital's restrictions never excluded spouses from labor and delivery, but I still mourned when my oldest daughter had to meet her new baby sister over a video phone call. The mourning didn't end there. Bringing a child into the world is normally joyful. Being able to show her off is exciting. The pandemic ruined many wonderful experiences. While both of our parents made the decision to travel to

meet their grandchild, aunts and uncles and friends were not given the same opportunity. Exciting vacations turned into rare trips to the grocery store. Friend groups and church outings became nonexistent. To this day, our daughter, who recently turned 1 year old, has not been baptized, or been in a church building for that matter. We long for the day when we can continue our lives in normalcy.

Parent: As a parent, you're supposed to protect your children at all costs. You feel like you're supposed to shield them from all pain and hurt that the world can bring. With a daughter arriving in a pandemic, things became more complicated. 3 days after arriving home from the hospital, Sophia, my newborn, was hospitalized for elevated bilirubin levels and an inability to maintain her core body temperature. ABO incompatibility is rarely severe enough to cause hemolysis requiring bili lights, but somehow we were unlucky. It seemed simple at first, just a night of bili lights. But, we soon learned that because her temperature had been high and then low, the hospital team wanted to rule out neonatal sepsis. My heart sank when I first heard those words, because I knew what they meant: sampling every body fluid you could reasonably get on a newborn. Outside of pandemic times, my husband and I could have worn a mask and cap and been close by while tests were drawn. But masks were few and hard to come by, and the hospital was only being careful. I couldn't be there. I handed my 5 ½ lb baby over and watched her be carried out of the room with the full knowledge that an intern was about to shove a needle into her spine. I wasn't there. I couldn't rub her head. I couldn't hold her hand. I was left alone with my husband in a large room, on the 10th floor of a hospital that at the time felt silent and cold while my 3 day old daughter was in pain in another room. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done. It was the longest 45 minutes of my life. The remainder of the hospitalization was smooth, but the pandemic made us feel isolated. Doors were always closed, there was no more parent participation in rounding, and what were likely friends faces were hidden behind masks and army-styled face shields. I longed to see my oldest daughter, who could not come up to visit. Post-partum baby blues set in quickly in a hospital room away from support.

The pandemic has been hard for parents. It's been almost impossible for working moms. I've felt guilty almost every day of the past year. I'm either working too much or not enough. Am I a bad mom for letting my kids see their grandparents? Or a bad mom for not letting my kids see their grandparents? Am I a bad mom because I send my kids to daycare instead of spending more for a nanny? Do I let my little ones come to the grocery store even though they can't wear masks? Will my kids forget what church is like? All these questions cross my mind nearly every day.

I hope we come out stronger when this is over. Empowered rather than embittered, encouraged rather than defeated.