

University of New Mexico

UNM Digital Repository

New Mexicans Reflect on Health and Wellness
During COVID-19

HSC and New Mexico Respond to COVID-19

Spring 5-7-2020

I am an island of positives amidst such great loss

Mary Lemon

University of New Mexico, mlemon@salud.unm.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hsc_covid19_reflections

Recommended Citation

Lemon, Mary. "I am an island of positives amidst such great loss." (2020).

https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/hsc_covid19_reflections/1

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the HSC and New Mexico Respond to COVID-19 at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexicans Reflect on Health and Wellness During COVID-19 by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.

I am an island of positives amid so much loss.

I am a Family Physician for the last 29 years, working in an outpatient clinic. This week is my 25th anniversary of coming to UNM HSC to work. I have loved my work overall – my favorite part has been connecting in a deep way to a group of individuals: my patients. And then comes the puzzles. I love solving puzzles. I love being the one to take a vague symptom or set of symptoms and think hard about what might be going on. And then comes the teaching – especially the patients! I get to teach them about their bodies. The students are also an inspiring bunch, keeping me in touch with the excitement and dedication I entered this field with.

With this backdrop a story then develops of increasing disappointment, stress, exhaustion, and heartbreak. Summarizing as briefly as I can, the attachment of our medical system to a capitalist system of profits for investors and increasing rewards for greedy tycoons amidst the USA culture of rugged individualism and the age old belief in manifest destiny (that folks who succeed deserve their lot and vice versa) has turned my job into something that is not sustainable. I spend a significant amount of time handling countless issues with prior approvals, rewriting prescriptions to fit coverage changes, letters to support individuals who are falling through cracks in our social system, advocating, excusing, explaining, anything I can do as a doctor to help a situation that honestly isn't even a medical one – I am the last resort, the only one so many can turn to. I am harassed on a daily basis by insurance companies. I have to fight to get reasonable specialty appointments for my patients (often not successful) or else try to manage something beyond my ken by myself. I have to do ever more on a computer system designed for hospital medicine, not outpatient primary care. This last year pushed me over a threshold. My appointment slots got shortened to a time that doesn't support me to practice comprehensively, and on top of that, the 2 hours I need every day to handle my messages and letters and faxes and forms were dismissed into non-existence, even though primary care management literature clearly states that primary care clinicians need an equal amount of time to manage our non-face-to-face work as our face-to-face work.

Our society is crumbling. The rich and powerful grab most of the resources and more and more people are suffering.

This pandemic highlights this very situation. Just recently the federal program that, in name, claimed to be designed to help small businesses keep from folding got snatched up immediately by big businesses. The majority of people dying are those who are chronically ill/disadvantaged. Despite earning only low wages for a horrendously terrible job in a meat packing plant, hundreds of sick workers are being ordered to return to an oppressive, life-threatening workplace so others who have more than they need can continue to eat meat. The needs of health care workers are pitted against the working poor as they protest the lockdowns because of their dire economic straits, when we could easily just give everybody a check every month like Canada is doing.

So I hesitate to tell you why I am so happy. It seems wrong, like survivors' guilt.

Here it is: I love my job again. Not more than 2 months ago I was putting in 11 hours a day to get my job done. I would get up before I felt rested, hurry to the office, and push, push, push myself as hard and fast as I could for 11 hours each day. I would eat my lunch in bites between other duties. I would not even take a bathroom break. I would then go home, wash my lunch dishes, have a bite, make my lunch for the next day and go to bed. I engaged in regular counseling sessions to keep from collapsing altogether in this tragic situation, and had to spend the first chunk of each session just breathing and slowing down. I was hanging on by a thread and thinking I couldn't make it to my official retirement age. I was struggling with every new thing I was supposed to do on the computer – this was like the “last straw” - each time I had to do something new I almost couldn't sustain the excess stress this put on me.

NOW: For the last month or so I have fewer patients to care for in my outpatient role. My day is relaxed. I get to spend the time enjoying them on the telephone, laughing and sharing stories as well as addressing their medical needs, going into more depth to teach them something or explain something to them than I had the time to do before. I have time to do all my messages and paperwork. I have time to read medical literature. I have time to reflect and write this piece! I get to sleep a little later because I don't have as much pre-work. I get to leave for home at a reasonable hour and have some time with my spouse or to run an errand or go for a walk and enjoy the dusk light and spring bursting forth before I go to bed.

And because of Zoom, I have been given the opportunity to develop more technological skills – ones that I actually am interested in having - AND the time to do it at my pace, so that I can happily navigate something new on a computer! A new experience for me.

The Feds are now forced to pay for telephone work (this was a huge part of my non-valued work before). I get to look with hope towards the future of primary care and how different it can be in good ways for clinicians and patients alike. My professional society is gaining ground on advocating for dropping the antiquated fee for service model that so completely misses the profundity and value of our work.

For years I have helped teach our Healer's Art course, where on the last day we envision a dream of a practice for ourselves that enables us to be our highest self. My dream always entails having plenty of time. I have that now. I know this is economically hard on the system that generates my paycheck and that I am not earning my keep at this moment. I might just decide to work even less than 0.8 when we ramp back up again. I am thoroughly enjoying loving my job and want to keep it that way.