



PERSPECTIVE: PART I

WAITING FOR A HURRICANE

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A few years ago, as a forecasted hurricane was bearing down on the Atlantic coast, I called to check on my nephew who lives on the Georgia Coast. We talked while he walked his dog on the beach—he sent me a picture of the two of them. It was beautiful day. Other than the forecast, life around him looked pretty normal. He had made no firm plans yet as to what he was going to do. “We’ve got some heavy surf, but not much else. We’ll see what happens.”

I couldn’t help but think back to that moment over the past week. We are all waiting for a hurricane. As the week started, Colorado had just a few dozen confirmed cases. Our hospital had one suspected case in house. It was sunny outside. Yet, in response to the forecasts, we were no longer walking on the beach, we were nailing up the plywood.

We sent the bulk of our providers and staff home to work and converted most of our appointments into virtual ones. We rushed to make sure everyone knew how to conduct virtual visits and to figure out how to choreograph the work of supporting staff and providers located in different locations. We distributed protocols for PPE and discussed and re-discussed our triage protocols as the ground shifted around us. We set up communications plans and a back-up org chart and started reaching out to volunteer and retired physicians to see who might help if we needed them. We did all of this to a soundtrack of pings from our e-mail accounts, heralding updated versions of the announcements and guidelines we had received and read just a few hours before.

My personal inbox was also receiving a steady stream of replies to an e-mail I had sent to friends and family over the weekend. To soothe my rising anxiety, I sent a note pleading with everyone to take the threat seriously. I included specific steps I hoped they all would take. The steady trickle of responses was mixed. For every 5 or 6 thank yous or requests for advice, there was a conspiracy theory counterpoint or a Chicken Little accusation. On Monday, my nephew in Savannah posted a picture of himself and his wife at a St. Patrick’s Day parade, steps from the beach he had walked before the earlier hurricane hit. My heart sank.

Around me, in Colorado, things were changing. Our governor was taking charge. Restaurants were closing to in-person dining. Schools closed. Business were sending workers home. “Stay home” was the clear message.

I took our first doc-of-the-day shift on Tuesday. I drained an abscess, diagnosed a new case of gout, and gowned-up for a patient who had worsening respiratory symptoms that I screened for Covid. In between, I fumbled through a series of virtual visits, making calls, and dispensing some prescriptions that a week ago I wouldn’t have considered if the patient weren’t sitting in front of me. I finished the day acutely aware that in the weeks and months ahead our patients will need our help with a long list of problems that have nothing to do with Covid.

I slept poorly that night as I had the night before—my mind working through various scenarios and making lists. How would we manage a huge patient surge? Which passwords and accounts would my wife need to access if something happened to me? Could we afford college tuition for both kids after our daughter finishes high school next year? Is our will up to date?

As the week came to an end, the surf looked a little heavier, but no storm yet. Five members of my department were on quarantine with confirmed cases of Covid. The hospital had six suspected cases and the state was reporting its sixth death.

I kept thinking back to my earlier call with my nephew before the hurricane. If he had talked then about his power to change the hurricane’s course, I would have forcefully urged him to get help. I realized my biggest source of anxiety now was whether he, and millions of other Americans, would believe they had that power right now—the power to change the course of this hurricane. My greatest worry is that not enough of them believe that, collectively, their sacrifice and inconvenience will be enough to downgrade the coming storm from a category 4 to several weeks of bad weather. I pray they do.

In the meantime, I will continue to nail up the plywood and prepare, in case they don’t.