

Hindu Hospital Chaplain Tells Her Covid Story

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BEAUMONT HSOPITAL »

IN-PERSON, FACE-TO-FACE INTERACTIONS WITH patients, families and staff have always been a key aspect of a chaplain's spiritual care. But the Covid-19 pandemic has shifted the way chaplains can conduct spiritual care in hospitals. Instead of in-person meetings, now a large part of my day is spent being a liaison through phone and video calls between patients and their families. The hardest part is when a patient is nearing the end of life and their family is unable to visit them in person. If some of those family members have also been infected, they are also unable to be with each other. I've spent many hours conducting conference calls with such families.

One particularly difficult situation that I had to deal with revolved around a multi-generational family that all lived in the same house. Three adults of that family were infected with COVID and were hospitalized the same day at different locations. Because they all lived in the same house, the rest of the family, though asymptomatic, were quarantined in the home. The patient who was hospitalized at my location was actively dying, and I was paged to be of support to the family. I went to the patient's ward and made a conference call to the rest of the family, including those who were hospitalized and those at home, so they could say their goodbyes over speakerphone. It was heartbreaking to hear the pain in their voices as the family expressed themselves. After the expiration of the patient at my site, I continued to follow the other two patients upon their request.

The pandemic's impact does not end with the passing away of a patient; it has also changed the way funerals are conducted. One Hindu family who lost a loved one to Covid-19 were only able to see their deceased loved one through a video call, and only a very limited number were allowed to attend the funeral home before cremation. The pandit, contacted through video-call, conducted a modified version of recitation of mantras before the deceased was cremated. The immersion of ashes in water is still pending for some families I know.



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In May, I lost my maternal grandfather in India. His death was not Covid-19 related, but the lockdown in India severely impacted the way his *antyeshti samskara* took place. As a family, we are still waiting for an opportunity to gather, both here and in India, to truly grieve. The inability to hold the traditional rites and rituals around death and dying has resulted in complicated grief situations. The healing and unfolding of the grieving process can only be addressed slowly over time.

The hospital staff has also been experiencing unprecedented levels of stress. The Spiritual Care Department developed printed cards with notes and quotes of encouragement to distribute to staff as a reminder of our presence. During shift changes, we have continued meeting individual staff members in a physically distant setting to allow them to share their

stress. We pray, read sacred literature, and often simply listen. I am routinely told by staff that just seeing us making our rounds brings them comfort. The spiritual care team itself also gather periodically to share our emotions, the highs and lows of our work. We all pray together, each in our own way.

I have been at the bedside of patients in intensive care and critical care units, all gowned up, to support patients and staff as best I could. In normal times, spiritual care has depended largely on nonverbal communication—body language, smiles, holding a hand or even sharing hugs during a crisis. But now all that is hidden or prevented by masks, gowns and protocols. The pandemic does not allow any human touch, so the challenge has been to continue finding more words of strength, comfort and encouragement.

On a personal level, I find myself wanting to spend more time listening to devotionals and bhajans. I am thankful to be able to come home to my family, share my emotions with them and be grateful for our time together. We've always worshiped together, but now we are studying the *Upanishads* as a group. Satsangs have moved online and the pujas are being live streamed from the temples, but the inability to gather socially and worship as a community is affecting the mental health of many, creating issues which may still have to be addressed after the pandemic is over.

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