

ID specialist transitions from fellow to faculty member during pandemic

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Editor's note: As the COVID-19 pandemic enters its third year, Alexandra Brugler Yonts, M.D., FAAP, is one of six pediatricians reflecting on what keeps her going, the lessons she's learned along the way and her hopes for the future. To read all six reflections, click [here](#).

There's no doubt transitioning from fellow to faculty member is challenging. But making the move as an infectious diseases specialist in the midst of a pandemic was downright terrifying, said Alexandra Brugler Yonts, M.D., FAAP.

"All of a sudden, I was answering the COVID pager all the time and answering questions that really no one had answers to," said Dr. Yonts, an attending physician in the Division of Infectious Diseases at Children's National in Washington, D.C., and an assistant professor of pediatrics at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences.

Dr. Yonts completed her pediatric infectious diseases fellowship in June 2020 as part of the combined Children's National/Food and Drug Administration (FDA) program and worked in the FDA's Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research. She then took a position as an attending physician at Children's National.

"I think everyone struggles with imposter syndrome and learning the ropes and dealing with being the ultimate decision maker and learning how to manage these things on your own. And add in the layer of having to read the news every single day to see what is new about COVID, what's the new discovery, what's the newest projection was really, really, really hard," she said.

Yet, the pandemic also opened up career opportunities.

Dr. Yonts is director of the hospital's post-COVID program for patients with ongoing symptoms and is co-investigator of a Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine trial.

Since the post-COVID program opened in May 2021, 34 children have been evaluated, and nearly 20 more have been scheduled through late March.



Courtesy of Children's National Hospital
Alexandra Brugler Yonts, M.D., FAAP, examines a 13-year-old patient enrolled in Children's National's post-COVID program.

While she's unsure how long the program will be needed, Dr. Yonts said it can serve as a model for treating pediatric patients with lingering symptoms after other infections.

"I think the multidisciplinary clinic model for nonspecific post-viral fatigue and things like that will be a huge area for growth in the future," she said.

Among the lessons she's learned over the past two years are the importance of talking to families about the risks and benefits of a treatment and the value of multidisciplinary collaboration.

"My experience at the FDA kind of made me the point person for concerns about vaccine-related myocarditis at our institution," she said. "I still get questions constantly about that."

That, in turn, led to collaboration with cardiologists and other divisions.

"In a perfect world and going forward, I will really try to push for more multidisciplinary evaluation or at least more frequent multidisciplinary conversations about patients because I think all the pediatric subspecialists and the generalists and the nurses and pharmacists bring very different but important perspectives," she said.

Dr. Yonts also has learned how beneficial it can be to take time for herself, whether it's eating dinner with her husband or watching TV for an hour after dinner. And she encourages others to do the same.

"I know it's hard because most of us in pediatrics and in medicine feel really guilty about letting someone else down," she said. "But really doing it has made a huge difference in my quality of life. And it's helped me actually think more about my own well-being and push me to do other things like work on my anxiety, see my doctor, all these kind of good personal health things."