

Battling the pandemic on the front line: ‘It’s very intense’

April 23, 2020

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Article type: [News](#)

Topics: [Emergency Medicine](#), [Hospital Medicine](#), [Infectious Diseases](#)

Editor’s note: *Pediatricians around the country have risen to the challenges posed by the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. Some are on the front lines battling the virus; others are connecting with patients while hunkered down at home. They are relying on creativity, ingenuity and tenacity to keep their patients healthy and their practices afloat. Here is one pediatrician’s story.*

Pediatricians like to say children are not little adults. That implies adults are not big children.

Katherine M. O’Connor, M.D., FAAP, learned that firsthand as New York City became the epicenter of the COVID-19 outbreak in late March.

As the city experienced a crush of patients, The Children’s Hospital at Montefiore in the Bronx was among pediatric hospitals that opened their doors to adult patients.

“It’s a privilege to be able to provide some help during this crisis for our city and our world, but to not have practiced adult medicine in 17 years and have it happen so quickly is quite overwhelming,” said Dr. O’Connor, attending physician and associate division director for pediatric hospital medicine.

Over the course of three weeks, Dr. O’Connor and her colleagues went from talking about the virus and watching trends to testing and treating pediatric patients to caring for adults with COVID-19.

“This miraculous virus that seems to be kind to children has led to now pediatricians changing course in career quickly,” she said.

And that change has been daunting.

“The (adult) patients, when they all came to the hospital, I didn’t expect that they would all be so hungry for oxygen, just needing so much more oxygen than we’re used to giving,” Dr. O’Connor said. “It’s not just like they’re kind of feeling a little bit unwell sitting in the hospital. They’re really needing help.”

In addition, her relationship with patients is unlike anything she has experienced.

“We’re trying to be mindful of how many times people come in contact with patients and using up the protective equipment to make sure we continue to have access to it,” Dr. O’Connor said. “And so, we’re having to have conversations with patients from doorways that we would typically have holding patients’ hands.”

In the midst of the uncertainty and unfamiliarity, Dr. O’Connor was bracing for what was to come.

“As pediatricians, we don’t have to face death as often as our adult colleagues do. And I think that we are very afraid to take care of dying patients,” she said. “They are often without family members, and this is all very new this week, so just having to jump into that will be something that’s scaring me personally.”

Dr. O’Connor acknowledged that she also was concerned about her own health, but said, “It’s certainly not something that’s going to stop me from being able to help other people who are suffering.”

So like a soldier on the battlefield, Dr. O’Connor marched on.



“It’s nothing I could have ever imagined in my career as a pediatrician,” Dr. O’Connor said. “It might sound overdramatic at times, but it’s definitely the closest thing that I’ve felt to being in a battle or on the front line of something. It’s very intense.”

To read other pediatricians’ stories,

visit <https://www.aapublications.org/news/2020/04/21/covidvignettes042120>.

Resource

- The AAP is collecting stories of member pediatricians during the COVID-19 pandemic, so that we can lift up and thank the heroes among us, advocate for the needs of on-the-ground physicians and share the experiences of other pediatricians with our community of members. The AAP will share select stories in blogs, social media and other communications, with permission. To share your story, visit www.aap.org/COVIDstory.

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