

Hospitalists Stare down the COVID-19 Pandemic: Its Impact on Hospital Medicine Practice

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ABSTRACT

Hospital medicine is the country's fastest growing medical specialty. The role of hospitalists has evolved greatly in the past few decades. Hospitalists have become the quarterbacks in the effort to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has brought about a transformational change to the practice of Hospital Medicine.

KEYWORDS

Hospitalist, COVID-19, Hospital Medicine Practice, pandemic, physician wellbeing

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Hospital medicine is the country's fastest-growing medical specialty.¹ The role of hospitalists has evolved greatly in the past few decades. With the onset of the pandemic, hospital medicine practice has been more challenging by virtue of the increased complexity of patients that require hospital care. Prior to the pandemic, the field of hospital medicine had been gradually emerging as a vital part of our healthcare delivery system. In the early days of hospital medical practice, the role of hospitalist was mostly seen as assisting the primary care physician in taking care of their patients while they were admitted in the hospital. The role of hospitalists has since evolved to become a crucial part in the care of many hospitalized patients. This includes serving as the team lead in managing complex illnesses, which requires a concerted multidisciplinary approach. Many hospitalists work 12-hour shifts, often working 7 days in a row, then having seven days off, to reduce the risk of burnout. Yet, more than 50% of hospital medicine physicians reported burnout before the pandemic.¹

At the beginning of the pandemic, many patients became afraid of going to the doctor's office or the hospital to fear contracting COVID-19. Even many patients who were severely ill preferred to tough it

out at home. This resulted in many hospitals and physicians experiencing a reduction in their income.²⁻⁵ In more than one way, the pandemic has been a significant stressor on our healthcare delivery system. It has also led to a substantial change in patient behavior.⁶ For physicians, especially hospitalists, the pandemic has brought about a significant difference in their approach to patient care. While many primary care physicians and specialists have the option of using telemedicine, for the most part, hospitalists have become the face of our healthcare system's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Hospitalists have become the forefront healthcare provider on the ground to deal with the pandemic.⁷ Typically, many of the patients that hospitalists take care of in the hospital are new to them, and they only have a comparatively short amount of time to create rapport, sort out their most pressing medical problems, coordinate care with subspecialists, and keep the patient and their loved ones updated on the progress of their care.

Hospitalists have faced many challenges with the onset of the pandemic, especially since many healthcare workers lost their lives at the beginning of the pandemic.⁸ This led to increased stress, fear, anxiety, and social isolation.^{9,10} It has become increasingly difficult



for hospitalists to build trust with patients, especially COVID-19-infected patients, given the physical isolation that was caring for these patients entails. Success in hospital medicine practice relies heavily on teamwork and collaboration. Team members must be familiar with each other and with the hospital system. Unfortunately, with the pandemic, many of the structures built into hospital medicine practice to encourage team building have been impacted; for instance, many hospitalist teams would often have lunch together at least once a week, in some groups daily. With the pandemic, this has no longer been possible. The result has been a reduction in team spirit, especially among new hires who have been hired during the pandemic. Many new hires have not had the opportunity to become familiar with their team members, as everyone has a mask on. This has exacerbated the pre-existing mental health crisis among physicians.¹¹ All of these effects have been disproportionately felt more by healthcare providers from minority groups and female healthcare providers.^{12,13}

Hospitalists have had to adapt to this new reality quickly. They have had to constantly review new articles about COVID-19, attend webinars, discuss and implement institutional changes to respond to the pandemic, stay updated with new clinical guidelines for the care of COVID-19 patients, and figure out new ways of conserving personal protective equipment (PPE). They also have had to develop new ways of communicating with their patients and their patients' loved ones, especially concerning end-of-life issues.¹⁴ The safety and wellbeing of hospital medicine physicians is crucial for our society to achieve victory over the COVID-19 pandemic.

One issue that has become increasingly clear to hospitalists and physicians during this pandemic is that more needs to be done to ensure the wellbeing of our physicians going forward, especially to prepare us for the next major stressor to our healthcare system, whatever it may be.

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