

Eyes closed

Abdu Sharkawy

Volume 8, Number 1, 2021

True Stories from the Front: Facing COVID-19

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076494ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v8i1.265>

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Publisher(s)

McGill University Library

ISSN

2291-918X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Sharkawy, A. (2021). Eyes closed. *The International Journal of Whole Person Care*, 8(1), 20–23. <https://doi.org/10.26443/ijwpc.v8i1.265>

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EYES CLOSED

Abdu Sharkawy

Physician, Infectious Disease Specialist, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
abdu.sharkawy@uhn.ca

Eyes Closed. Heavy lids burn.
The clock's blue glows 4:38 AM through fluttering lashes. A moth to a flame.
I stare blankly; lucid with exhaustion.

Parsing through fractured pieces of dreams and vague recollections, whispers inside an empty space with no walls to place them. No time to face them.

My patient. Why is he so sick? Heart failure? Did he get enough Lasix?

It haunts me. It follows me. It plagues me.

The damp sweat on my backside makes my clothes cling tightly. A child's hand clasped inside his mother's palm. Desperate but welcomed.

It's just COVID-19. It has to be.

The layers are peeled off one by one, shedding the message of torment. Slowly.

Pneumonia? It's been five days of antibiotics already.

4:52 AM

A blunt deluge of water batters my face in a shower stall colder than I expect.

A blanket of pine needles hits me. My skin jolts at every edge.

Am I awake now?

What if it's a pulmonary embolus? No. It's just COVID-19. It has to be.

5:08 AM

I wipe myself dry and see in front of myself clearly.
My focus is short-lived.

5:27 AM

My stomach turns in short and jagged circles. A chorus of nerves undulates inside me.
Thoughts race randomly. Violently. Doubts linger. They intensify. A gag nearly chokes me when my electric toothbrush meets the far recesses of my hind molars. The gnawing buzz inside my ears is an unwelcome guest.

5:49 AM

Clothes on. Phone on. Pager on. Watch strapped to my wrist. Unstrapped. Don't contaminate.
I can do this, right? Can I? It's not SARS. What is it then? What is COVID-19?
I know I should but I can't eat. Not now. Not yet.
It has to be heart failure. I will add more Lasix. Soon.

6:13 AM

The stillness of a morning air heavy with mist erases my dry comfort as I lock my front door.
It is replaced instantly as a sheet of sweat settles once again on the nape of my neck with stubborn determination.
Will he be intubated today? Is it safe? What should I tell his family?

6:29 AM

I fumble with the radio tuner as I drive mindlessly.
The crude assault of empty chatter vying for my attention is pitted against sobering news headlines.
Everything is COVID-19. It's universally spoken. It's universally hidden.
The bitterness of my coffee greets my stomach with inhospitable intensity.
The road is quiet. I drive faster than I should.
I'm barely aware of what is more than 500 metres ahead.
He should be intubated today. It's ALL COVID-19. It has to be.

6:53 AM

I find myself in the underground hospital parkade. I don't remember the last 10 minutes.

7:03 AM

Scrubs. Surgical mask. Face shield.

A calmness descends on me. I'm ready now.

I have to be. I HAVE to be.

My coffee is cold.

I recalibrate.

7:30 AM

Rounds begin with military precision. The team is assembled. Doctors, nurses, PPE spotter, computer on wheels. Charts set.

Donning PPE is tedious, unnerving and painfully deliberate in its expression. A ritual of tense rules in exactitude.

The blue and red lines of tape on the floor demarcate the boundaries between competence and contamination. A crude test of caution and shame. Don't screw this up.

I'll talk to his family.

7:42 AM

Hand rinse. Gown. Oh the gown. As a rule, it is impossible to tie from behind. Always.

Hand rinse. Don't touch your face shield.

Right glove on extended cuff. Don't touch your face shield.

Left glove on extended cuff. Don't touch your face shield.

Spotter check. A nod of approval brings relief. Permission to enter.

7:47 AM

He is difficult to rouse.

My voice is muffled by the mask and the face shield.

87% on the oxygen sat monitor.

His facemask compresses his face, probing desperately to find life inside the frail wetness of his lungs and the tightness that frames them. A strait jacket to every breath.

This is ARDS. A gruesome cascade of inflammatory toxicity, unrelenting in its pace, unforgiving in its dialogue with therapy.

The steroids aren't working.

I clasp his hand and squeeze it determinedly. It is cold and pliant like baker's dough, swollen with the edema of 23 days. It falls uselessly.

His legs are mottled and tense, colder than his hands, even more void of life, as if not his own.

The foley catheter dangles from the bedside. Barely 20cc urine in almost 7 hours. Kidneys departed.

Hope fades. It won't be long now. What will I tell his family? My mind scans frantically for a last minute strategy, any morsel of regenerative faith I can marshal. I come up empty.

7:56 AM

ICU is coming. My voice is loud now as I speak in broken Italian, his mother tongue, hoping this will somehow awaken the most primitive of instincts in him and engage even a token response. I yell through the mask I am wearing, but neither my words nor the oxygen he needs to sustain life can reach him through his own mask. The irony is callous and malignant.

We stand here both together and apart wearing dueling masks - mine to protect me from him. His to protect him from...

Neither one of us is safe. COVID-19 is a prison.

7:57 AM

Oxygen 74%. My thoughts turn to his family. What kind of husband was he? What kind of father was he? How will he be remembered? How will I face his family?

It's quiet. His breaths narrow, then slow in exaggerated, feeble articulations like an accordion barely able to expand.

His breath stills.

There is no music.

Eyes closed.■