

Nurse practitioner: there is still a desperate need for protective gear keeping loved ones from seeing their relatives in the hospital

COMMENTARY

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I am a nurse practitioner, and my job now is calling families of COVID-19 patients in the intensive care unit to update them and provide support. These families desperately want to see their loved ones; they understand that they can't.

I also care for non-COVID-19 patients in the hospital, and their families typically can't visit them either. This is true in many hospitals dealing with this crisis and has prompted headlines about COVID-19 patients "dying alone." It might be helpful to explain exactly why we're in this terrible situation.

First, COVID-19 and other patients are likely not dying alone right now. Someone on the staff is aware of and, if possible, with the patient during their last moments. Nurses are often at the bedside, holding dying patients' hands, and making sure they are not physically suffering. Hospital chaplains say prayers and visit patients as much as they can. If you have a loved one in the hospital, know that staff is likely trying to be with them at the end.

But these clinical interactions are hampered by the ongoing inadequate amount of COVID-19 testing and personal protective equipment (PPE). Neither situation is going to get better any time soon. If we had even more community-wide testing, we would either know who doesn't have COVID-19, via a negative test result, or who has already had it, via serologic testing. This might make hospitals more inclined to allow visitors to see their loved ones.

Even with the additional tests Gov. Larry Hogan was able to get from South Korea, we still need many more. If we had enough PPE to not only adequately protect hospital staff but also hand out to visitors, we could allow more visitors as well. But that means many more masks, gowns, face shields, etc. to cover current needs and allow enough for the foreseeable future.

This crisis will likely go on for months, and we will need more of these things until there is widespread access to a successful vaccine. As a health care worker, I can tell you the scarcity of testing and PPE has made my work, and that of all other health care workers, so much harder. We very much appreciate the public's gratitude and support for our

work. But we need more and it's not just us that are affected. It also affects those of you with hospitalized loved ones via restricted hospital visitation.

And more than health care workers have to advocate to get these things. There has to be pressure from the public. And that pressure needs to be consistently aimed at the federal government. We've already seen that Maryland, on its own, cannot fix these problems, although Governor Hogan is to be applauded for his valiant efforts.

So, the next time you hear a federal official saying we have adequate testing and PPE, ask if that's enough to allow visitors to the hospital. Ask how it is that, months into this pandemic, making more tests and PPE is still not a priority? Why we still don't have enough swabs for the test kits and why we already know we are low on the glass vials needed for them and for a future vaccine?

The factories making ventilators are much appreciated, but that won't address the underlying issue of identifying people with the virus and isolating them, and of protecting everyone, including family visitors, from catching it by access to all needed PPE.

If you are as frustrated and angry as we health care workers are about these things, please express that anger with your federally-elected officials. Some of them are lying about how much progress they've made in this area and how we've "turned a corner" on this pandemic. We have not and we won't until we have adequate testing and PPE. In the meantime, you won't be able to visit your loved ones in the hospital. And some will continue to die with only a nurse holding their hand.

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