SKETCHES FROM THE FRONTLINES

Written by Dr. Jillian Horton   Illustrated by G.M.B. Chomichuk
with Lettering by Lyndon Radchenka

Ontario Medical Association Physician Health Program is pleased to collaborate with Dr. Jillian Horton on this project. Conveying physician experiences and narratives during the COVID19 pandemic serves to document experiences and share powerful narratives for a profession at a time when full focus is on doing the job, taking care of patients and each other.

If you are a physician, resident or medical student in Ontario and you would like support please call or email confidentially 1-800-851-6606
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MY NAME IS DR. CAROLYN SNIDER.

I'M CHIEF OF EMERGENCY MEDICINE AT ST. MICHAEL'S HOSPITAL IN TORONTO.

I STARTED MY RESIDENCY HERE JUST AT THE TAIL END OF THE SECOND WAVE OF SARS. I MISSED MOST OF IT, BUT I HAVE A CLOSE FRIEND WHO HAD SARS.

"WE'D BEEN GETTING READY FOR COVID FOR WEEKS. I GOT THE CALL ONE NIGHT, JUST AS IT HIT THE NEWS, "IT'S HERE."

"MY FRIEND WAS ON CALL THAT NIGHT. I ASKED HER IF SHE WANTED TO BE ON CALL.""I NEED YOU TO GIVE ME THE LIST.

WHAT LIST?""CAN I TAKE YOUR SHIFT?"

NO, I THINK I'M READY."

"WE SAT DOWN TOGETHER."

"THE LIST OF EVERYTHING YOU WISH HAD HAPPENED DURING SARS."
“And that was what I worked from in the first few days.”

“There was a lot of trauma for the people who had worked through SARS. You can see it’s still there for them. It was very real. So that list was an important roadmap.

“There’s definitely worry. What if we become one of those big pandemic spaces? Like Elmhurst, NY. I have to know the signals are that would make me say, ‘Go!’ Turn on those monitors. Open the new units. Take it to the next level.

“But like most people, the thing I worry about most is my family. This is going to be a long one. Thinking about what it means to finish a shift, to make sure I don’t bring anything home. My husband and kid have been so patient. I’m putting in 18 hour days.

“But certain times are sacred. At 7:30 our street in downtown Toronto goes crazy to show support for frontline workers. There are pots, pans, noisemakers, cowbells, musical instruments. Literally our whole street is out. I kind of feel embarrassed.

“But it is so important for the children of the frontline workers. And it’s watching my kid take this all in—‘That to me is huge. So that’s actually a wonderful time. We can leave that worry behind for a moment.”
"Last week an RN colleague who is wonderful— he pressed with some questions.

Are you sure our latest protocols are safe?

I'll bet you're like me, you probably have at least an hour a day when you're watching social media when you're absolutely sure you're doing the wrong thing.

Yeah!

I have those hours too, and I go back to the studies. And I go back to who is helping make those decisions. And I remember that I trust them and I've read those studies and what they're saying is probably the right thing to do.

"It was amazing to watch his anxiety all dissipate right there. It's ok to be afraid. We all have those moments.

"Another feeling is—expectancy—what's going to happen next? In the ER we're used to that feeling—standing at the foot of a trauma waiting for EMS to arrive—maybe a gunshot wound or a thoracotomy. We're getting ready. Mentally preparing, waiting for it all to be set in motion.

"But you can't maintain that excitement, that intensity without taking a break from it periodically."
“This past weekend it was my birthday. I always make sure I have that day off.

My team said, turn off your phone, turn off your email. My colleagues sent out an email saying “don’t bug Carolyn this weekend, she gets a full weekend off, it’s our gift to her.

“I made them promise that they would call if something really terrible happened, and they promised. You know what happened? I relaxed for 48 hours. Just at home, of course. I cleaned up. I cleaned my bathroom! I got my house in order.

“But the other thing that happened is I woke up on Sunday morning and my team had left tulips out on the porch.

Just the fact that in the midst of all this that people were thinking about me. That was the real gift. There are a lot of people caring for me right now.

“In the midst of me caring for them.”