Daniela Krahe  
COVID-19 and Healthcare: A Student/EMT’s Perspective

I want to preface this essay by saying my intention is not to collect applause, or draw attention to my good deeds, because there are men and women who have been serving the public for decades more than I have. Until I have worked as many calls as these truly brave people, I consider myself merely a minor character in their fast-paced world of emergency medicine.

Being both a college student and an EMT in these times is possibly one of the hardest juggling acts I’ve ever had to pull off. When I get home at 6am from my shifts that can last up to 48 hours, all I want to do is sleep the rest of the day. Online classes make that impossible for me to do since there are mounds of homework waiting for me to complete them on time. I briefly think about taking less shifts to give myself more time to relax, but I remember that this is what I want out of a career. I’ve found my passion in emergency medicine and throwing myself to the mercy of the public is exactly what I’ve dreamed of doing since I became a pre-med student. This course has recently emphasized the importance I felt towards expressing yourself in medicine and avoiding android-like patient contact. It is for this reason that I even feel confident expressing my opinions; with more open conversations about medicine and its state in the world, we can take better care not only of patients but also their caregivers. I feel the same sentiment that Dr. Rafael Campo expresses in *The Desire to Heal*: “In the act of writing I encountered again the shocking, empowering energy of a great desire” (Campo 14).

Before returning home to work, I heard about the PPE shortage and rising confirmed cases. I had no idea how bad it was. In my first two weeks back, I worked more than 120 hours, 84 of them in one week. I was handed a N-95 respirator and told the rules: only wear it around COVID-19 patients, use it 5 times before changing masks, one time counts as 8 hours, when you’ve used it for 40 hours put it in a paper bag and use it again in 10 days. Now I knew how bad it was; I didn't even end up taking mine out of its packaging during the entire shift in fear of getting it dirty and having to put it back on my face the next shift. I stuck to the two surgical masks I was given and told to also reuse. It’s not my company’s policy that angers me though. Health leaders are telling us it’s ok to reuse these N-95 masks 5 times. Health leaders being pressured by government officials who did so little to prepare us for a disaster like this. So, after 40 hours of being possibly exposed to the virus, we are finally allowed to get a new mask. That’s almost two entire shifts for me. The number of patients I'm in contact with during that time can be anywhere from 10-30 people. Ten to thirty people I could pass the virus on to by reusing my mask. This shortage made me stop and think about all the times before this pandemic that I had unknowingly exposed myself to dangerous illnesses on calls. “I finally knew how human I was, I was made acutely aware in one terrible moment that all any of us has in the world is the same body” (Campo 60).

It's also frustrating that we weren’t legally allowed to know if we've been in contact with someone who tested positive for COVID until recently. Supposedly we are going to be informed if we were in contact with someone who has the virus, but hospital staff are already so overwhelmed that I don’t imagine them remembering to tell us. That means if I take in a patient who is under suspicion of having the virus, I probably won’t know about it if they do test positive. So I will continue to wear the mask I was wearing for 8 hours, touching it who knows how many times to readjust it before a trauma call, or take it off so I can brush my teeth before trying to take a nap at 3 AM. And then when my shift is finally over, I will wash my hands and get into my car with my work clothes that still have traces of the infected person on it, fix my dirty sweatshirt from riding up when I get out of the car, and then touch the same doorknob that my little brother with asthma will touch. And this will continue for my next 3-4 shifts until I develop symptoms and find out I also am sick now. If I would have heard from the hospital during that shift that my patient had COVID, I would have never gone home to my family, avoiding 4 more people getting sick. That’s how this disease is spreading so fast, and that’s why first responders are afraid. And working for the small ambulance services in my county are at least 40-50 other first responders who...
this could also happen to. We as a country are miserably failing at protecting our first responders and health care workers, and it doesn’t seem to be getting better.

To hide the conditions the government has given us no choice but to work in, the media is attempting to raise support for us. I think a lot of attention is being drawn to our first responders for being brave during this time, which is a great thing. People are thanking us for what we're doing to protect our country from this disease spread, but I think they are forgetting that this disease, as severe as it is, hasn’t suddenly become our number-one priority like it has for everyone else. I appreciate the kind words I get for taking extra measures as an EMT to prevent the spread of this illness by wearing so much PPE, as well as the articles about what to do to help our EMS workers stay protected from the virus. For example, I’ve read about connecting us to drive-through COVID-19 testing centers [1] and seen links to charities that accept donations to supply us with the essentials [2]. But I, along with the dozens of other EMS workers who have been doing this before I was even born, have never seen the same praise or protection outside of times of major crisis. I have never seen an everyday news update about the importance of "protecting our EMS workers during overdose calls in alleyways" or "protecting our EMS workers on the side of the road during car crashes." When I’m wearing my N-95 in public, people back away in fear, but when we’re working a heart attack call on the side of I-80, people fly by at 75 mph 3 feet away from us. People currently don't realize that this crisis is just another addition to the stressful calls we get every day. The last thing on my mind last week, when I was rushing a man who had been shot twice in the face (and who was losing blood and consciousness fast) to the hospital, was the coronavirus. The last thing on my mind that same day, when I was kneeling on the disgusting floor of a drug house getting the IV Narcan ready for the man who was grey and barely breathing, was the coronavirus. The last thing on my mind two days ago, when I worked two back to back cardiac arrests without a moment to breathe, was the coronavirus. “The real atrocities of the world had become commonplace and automatic for me” (Campo 39). I should be concerned about my own well-being, but that thought takes second place to the fear and agony my patients are feeling. For all the aforementioned calls, all I was wearing for PPE were gloves and a surgical mask. Before the coronavirus scare, all we would have been wearing were gloves, since we don't have the time to make a patient with a brain injury struggling to breathe wait while we struggle to get the yellow paper-thin gowns over our heads. Unfortunately, unless someone you know is working in the field, first responders tend to go unnoticed.

This essay was not intended to be an angry rant from some college student, but I am the last person to stay quiet when things are not right, especially when first responders and healthcare workers are hurting. I hope that this country can quickly repair its relationship with us, because we are quickly losing faith in it. My coworkers should not feel like celebrities when they finally get a bit of recognition for the unforgiving work that brave men and women have been doing for decades. We shouldn’t blush when we are told by the government that at this time we are “essential employees.” We aren’t asking for stars on the walk of fame, we’re just asking for unwavering respect.

Works Cited
