

Opinion

Guest column

Dying with COVID in an ICU

by Daniel Whitlock

I'm considered old even though I don't feel it, and I have a chronic illness as well. These criteria put me at a high risk of dying if I am infected with the COVID-19 virus.

I am also a retired physician and medical administrator, so perhaps I have too much knowledge about medical care, or maybe I'm just a realist who understands the current situation in which our hospital, physicians, nurses and staff find themselves during this pandemic! As I have listened to the news and heard the reality of increasing COVID cases and decreasing availability of hospital beds and resources, I have started to think about the possibility of my own demise. I have decided it's time to take as much control as possible about how I want my days to end if my family and I should find myself in that situation.

Should I become infected with the COVID-19 virus I will most likely be admitted to the ICU. Here I will encounter the most sophisticated technical care available anywhere in the country; ventilators, multiple IV's, infusions, medications, synthetic antibodies, procedures and protocols that caregivers are using to save patients from this heinous disease.

Caring for patients in a pandemic is overwhelming when doctors and nurses experience the trauma of knowing they cannot slow down. Their feelings must remain muffled in order to serve the next patient requiring their attention. The emotional toll they feel when overwhelmed by tight resources, too few staff and very sick patients who often die leads to burnout and can rapidly cascade to PTSD, guilt and chronic anxiety. I know this is true because I have walked in their shoes. This is the reality our hospital staff face, heroically and selflessly, each day. Our caregivers are a scarce resource – a resource we must not squander. Therefore, if the unwanted possibility occurs I would become one of their patients, is it possible for me to relieve a fraction of their emotional burden?

Part of the answer can be found in an "advance directive" or "living will," which I have had for many years. This document lays out the types of care I want, or don't want, at the end of my life. But recently, I have realized this pandemic has put a new spin on my health-care directive. I have begun to discuss with my wife my wariness of the unknown. As death comes to us all, so I want to make sure my health-care directive identifies what is important to me. An advanced directive is not a document to set my choices in stone. Most of all it sets the stage for respectful and non-confrontational discussions between my family and hospital staff regarding my final care.

Therefore, as I review my advance directive relative to COVID-19, I know a couple of things: first, I do want a ventilator, provided the caregiving team thinks it in my best interest. I trust my family will engage them in this dialogue. And secondly, I do not want "heroic" care that may result in a very difficult rehabilitation or taking precious resources from a patient who may have a much better prognosis. My family and caregivers should know many of their choices may be ambiguous ones and be assured I concur, in advance, with their difficult choices. I am going to ask my family and caregivers trust each other explicitly – no arguing, no blaming, no histrionics!

I encourage all of us to face the facts of this pandemic and its possible consequences; death is one of them. Talk to your partner and family about the stark reality; a reality that should not be faced without adequate forethought and planning.

Daniel J. Whitlock, MD, MBA, retired from St. Cloud Hospital CentraCare after 16 years as its vice president for medical affairs.

Our view

Wishing you health, happiness, peace

It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, and many other celebrations of faith, culture and blessings.

December truly is a month of holidays.

On Dec. 8, Buddhists celebrated Bodhi Day which commemorates Buddha's attainment of understanding. Celebrations of Bodhi Day are quiet. Celebrants meditate, study the teachings of Buddha, chant and hold services. Some may decorate a Bodhi tree, string up colorful lights to represent the paths to enlightenment or celebrate with a traditional meal of rice and milk.

Hanukkah began at sundown Dec. 10. The festival is observed for eight nights and days and may begin at any time in late November to late December. Typically, a me-

norah is used during this celebration to note the days with lighted candles. The holiday commemorates Jewish victory that ended a three-year period of religious persecution and restored Jewish independence.

Fiesta de Guadalupe Feast, Dec. 12, honored Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mexico's patron saint. The day commemorates the appearance of the Virgin Mary to a Mexican peasant named Juan Diego in 1531. Candles, food and song are part of this celebration.

The shortest day of the year, Dec. 21, is also one of the oldest celebrations in the world. Yule is a Pagan holiday celebrating the Winter Solstice. It begins at sundown and ends on Jan. 1. The holiday itself revolves around thanking gods and goddesses for blessings and the

change of seasons.

Of course there is Christmas Dec. 25, which celebrates the birth of Jesus.

Kwanzaa closes the month from Dec. 26 through Jan. 1. This annual celebration of African-American culture and tribute to African festivals of harvest has been practiced since the mid-1960s. It celebrates seven different principles of building community, including unity, self-determination, collective work, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith. Families might decorate, light a candle each day and reflect on each principle, enjoy a feast, exchange gifts, reflect and play drums and other music.

However you celebrate this festive time of year, we wish you and your family health, happiness and peace.

During troubled times, there's still hope for New Year

As December continues on, the holiday season is upon us, and the prospect of finally leaving 2020 behind draws ever closer. This has been a rough and completely unpredictable year. If someone had told me at this time last year what was all in store, I would not have believed them. A global pandemic that has killed more than 300,000 Americans, an election that has stretched our societal divides to a breaking point and an economic crisis that has inflicted pain on so many businesses and workers. It is tough to see if anything went right this year. While I am most certainly looking forward to the promise of better times ahead, I think there are some events this year that can give us some hope.

COVID-19 has certainly been a catastrophe like no other, affecting every part of our daily lives. But I know that I have been lucky. There have been far too many people who have died, lost a loved one or had serious complications because of this virus.

Through all of this, our health-care workers show their inspiring dedication and service. As so many people have needed their help, healthcare workers have risen to the challenge, at much personal sacrifice and risk to themselves as well. It is truly inspiring to see the level of drive to assist others that they bring every day, and their work gives me hope that eventually we can overcome this disease.

Connor Kockler
Guest Writer



The election is another topic from which it seems there is no good path ahead. It is sad to see fellow Americans so bitterly divided about the direction of the country and bickering about whose voices should be included in making decisions that will affect us all. While this situation is terrible, an anecdote I have from election day gives me some solace that things might improve.

While serving as an election judge, I was amazed by the level of turnout. Hundreds of people came to the polling site I worked to cast their ballots, and hundreds more had already voted absentee. Applying that throughout all of the precincts in the state brought Minnesota close to setting a new voter turnout record and the highest in the nation. One thing that really impressed me was the number of newly registered voters. It wasn't just young people voting for the first time, either. I registered senior citizens and middle-aged people as well.

For those newly registered who were not just turning 18, this might have been the first time in a long while that they decided to vote, or maybe they had never exercised their right to vote before. It was such an amazing feeling to

be part of people's acts of registering to vote, and it's made me more optimistic that people really care for and are engaged in our democracy. If we can keep up this kind of turnout and interest in politics, maybe we will be able to get more accomplished.

In these troubled times, we should also be mindful of all of our local businesses and workers. Through guidelines and lockdowns people are working every day to keep their businesses going and provide for family and the community. Now more than ever is a time to recognize those in need of assistance and to give them a helping hand. Recently, the CSB/SJU community turned out big to support Sliced on College Avenue, the pizza place in St. Joseph, when that restaurant put out an appeal on social media.

So while 2020 has been a year that has tested and frayed so many of us, we should remember there is some cause for optimism, that people are working hard to improve the situation and to assist their neighbors in the community. While we enjoy the holiday season and look forward to 2021, this past year showed us that in troubled times, there is always hope that can be found. And that's what the holidays are all about.

Connor Kockler is a student at St. John's University. He enjoys writing, politics and news, among other interests.

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