

Inside Tract Podcast Transcript
Episode 101

Voices of Urology: COVID-19 in Michigan with Dr. Brian Stork

Host: The State of Michigan has emerged as another COVID-19 hotspot in the United States. As of April 9th, the state had more than 20,000 cases. Today we're speaking with Dr. Brian Stork, an assistant clinical professor in the Department of Urology at the University of Michigan and he's up in Muskegon, Michigan. Dr. Stork, what are you seeing in Michigan right now relative to COVID-19?

Dr. Stork: Muskegon is on the west side of the state of Michigan. And as a lot of people are probably aware, the COVID uptaken cases really began in Southeast Michigan and the Detroit area and has spread into the suburbs and really across Southeast Michigan. The hospital systems over there, in many cases, are overwhelmed, Henry Ford Hospital, Beaumont Hospital to name a couple. And a lot of other hospitals now and in the southeast region are picking up coronavirus patients, specifically my colleagues in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan.

Up until very recently, we had been spared a large number of cases over here in West Michigan but this weekend, I had a couple of coworkers in my office test positive for the virus and I'm aware of a couple other colleagues in the community that have tested positive as well. So it puts a real face on this virus. And when you have coworkers and colleagues test positive, this really gets real.

Host: Dr. Stork, what type of precautions or protocols should be in place if an employee or someone on staff tests positive for COVID-19 at a practice?

Dr. Stork: And the answer to that I think is gonna vary day to day and by institution to institution, so you definitely want to check with your institution about what they're currently recommending. I can tell you that the advice for our coworkers was that they should self-quarantine for two weeks and if their symptoms become severe that we want them to seek treatment in the emergency room. For the rest of us that may or may not have an exposure if you can get tested, obviously, that would be beneficial to know your status.

But beyond that, without symptoms, we're still coming to work and we're wearing masks and we're doing all of the personal hygiene that we possibly can with respect to hand washing, just taking extra measures to keep counters, bathrooms, telephones, doorknobs clean and all that sort of thing. And really just trying to keep everyone out of the office we possibly can that we can

manage by phone or by video visit or in any other fashion. The thing that's specific about urology though is that occasionally there are patients that have needs such as a clogged catheter or something of that nature that have to come into the office and need to have treatment and we just have to be careful.

Host: This is obviously a stressful time for everybody involved. Can you discuss some ways that folks might be able to mitigate burnout or take better care of themselves during this unprecedented time?

Dr. Stork: I think maybe there's two different camps here. The first camp is probably the urologists that have been mobilized to work in other capacities that they're not used to be it on the front lines taking care of medical patients or in ICUs and certainly, I have colleagues in New York and New Jersey that are falling into that situation. And I think it's important for them to know really how much their colleagues care about them because I think if you understand that you're not going through this alone and that you have the support of others that that goes a long way.

I think the act of being able to do something to help others during this time, while on one hand, it's very stressful, on the other hand, it seems to fulfill our sense of purpose. And so when the colleagues that I have talked to that are on the front lines, they feel good that they're able to use their skills to help others. The other camp of physicians is maybe more like myself who were waiting for this virus to take hold in their community or hoping that there will be just a few cases.

And then in our case, I think trying to maintain a routine and trying to maintain a purpose are really helpful. So I've been trying to get up at the same time every morning, I've been trying very hard to continue to exercise regularly, I've been trying not to stress eat, if you will. I've been trying to stay more focused on the positive things because as we are overwhelmed with news and social media, the vast majority of it is negative and stressful. And I think taking a few minutes to think about the good things in life is really helpful and meditating or just 5 or 10 minutes silence can really help break that stress cycle. I think we all need a break from that cycle of negative energy.

Host: How do you think this experience is going to change you as a person or as a healthcare provider?

Dr. Stork: I think the longer it goes on, the more potential there is for us to have a real change going forward. I know for myself, I'm really conscious of the socioeconomic disparity that seems to be taking place in our community with respect to who's getting this virus and who's not. And I would hope that

when this time is over that I would devote a little more time to working towards solving those inequities. I also hope that as urologists, as physicians and as a nation that we would unify around this experience rather than letting it divide us.

I think in the history of our country, we've always come together for a war, I don't think of this as a war. I think of this more as an opportunity for us all to gather together around a common goal and that common goal is taking care of each other, whether you're a urologist on the front line, whether you're a urologist who's maybe not so much on the front line or whether you're a patient or a family member who's staying home and adhering to social distance. And so I would really hope that at the end of all this, this would bring us closer together as a specialty, as physicians, and as a country.

Host: How is your family doing during this uncertain time? I know you have one child that was slated to graduate from high school this spring.

Dr. Stork: My son who is a senior is very disappointed that he's not gonna get to spend the last two to three months of school with his friends, that the graduation ceremony has been put on hold and that he has to do video classes now on a regular basis. My daughter, who's the social light of our family is equally, if not more frustrated with the situation. You know, there's lessons to be learned here and I think family values, how we approach this challenge together. Although I certainly don't wish this upon my kids, I'm hoping that there are lessons that can be learned here that will carry on for the rest of their life that it may be some ways are more important than some of the other lessons that they learn in the next two to three months if they were in school.

Host: Dr. Stork, are there any other silver linings you want to point out for our audience about what you think could come away from this pandemic?

Dr. Stork: Well, I think one silver lining might be emotional honesty either with ourselves and/or with each other. As urologists, we go through pretty rigorous training of medical school and residency. And even beyond residency, being a urologist isn't always easy. And I know a lot of people don't think about or talk about their feelings much but I can tell you with this virus that I've had the whole range of emotions from denial to anger to worry, frustration, acceptance, and that those emotions occur over and over in different orders and to different degrees.

So I think one silver lining is the opportunity to self-reflect and to think about what others are going through and to think about it differently. I think another silver lining is retired general surgeon friend of mine, Dr. Dick Camps used to

say that all of medical practice is about managing fires and that the entire time you're practicing medicine there's fires all over the place and you can only direct your attention towards the biggest fire at the time. And I know that since I've been home working more with telephone visits and video visits that I've had time to attend to some of the smaller fires, like optimizing my electronic medical record templates and doing CME and that sort of thing. So maybe if there's a silver lining in this, maybe I'll be a better urologist when we're done.

Host: Dr. Stork, do you have anything else to add that might be informative for our audience about your experience dealing with everything going on during this pandemic?

Dr. Stork: I'm normally pretty upbeat when I talk to you on these podcasts, and I don't mean to sound like a downer today. All I can say is that the social distancing is so important and I'm sure people are tired of hearing it. The weather's getting nicer up here in the Midwest and I know everybody's itching to get outside to get on their boats, to go to the garden stores but this is really important. And I was practicing social distancing even before my colleagues tested positive and I can tell you that once that happens to you, you're going to have an entirely different view of this situation and the need to distance. And everybody needs to do their part and take this seriously.

Host: Dr. Brian Stork is an assistant clinical professor in the Department of Urology at the University of Michigan. Thank you, Dr. Stork, for taking the time for us today.