

AUA Inside Tract Podcast Transcript
Episode 105

Voices of Urology: Experiences from a "COVID-19 Only" Hospital

Host: We are back here on the "AUA Inside Tract Podcast." Our guest today is Dr. Brian McNeil, urologist with SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University in Brooklyn, New York City. Welcome Dr. McNeil, and tell us about how the COVID-19 situation is going at your institution right now.

Dr. McNeil: Well, first off, Casey, it's a pleasure to be here with you. It's good to talk to you and good to reconnect with members of the AUA. I was looking forward to seeing everybody at the National Convention in D.C., but we will be seeing each other again soon. So, I miss everyone, first and foremost. And as far as how I'm doing here in Brooklyn, things seem to be settling down a little bit regarding COVID. My fingers are crossed. I think the ideal way to define it is to say that we are cautiously optimistic, cautiously though.

Host: What's your experience been like? How has your day to day work shifted and changed as this pandemic hit New York City?

Dr. McNeil: My daily practice has changed, as well as the practice of all urologists, I think, who work in a tri-state area. For me, my hospital was deemed a COVID only facility by Governor Cuomo. So, we saw a sort of an onslaught of COVID patients during the surge, and our ICU was full, they actually remained fairly full, and our emergency room was overwhelmed. And we all pretty much had to come together. You know, a mentor of mine several years ago told me that while I am a urologist, you're a physician first. And that's the thought that comes to mind when I think of the pandemic and how we've responded to it as a urological community, you know, worldwide and, especially in New York.

Host: Tell us about working with COVID-19 patients. How did it feel? What was your confidence level dealing with this type of pandemic?

Dr. McNeil: I gotta admit to you, initially early on, I was a little worried, I was a little concerned for my own safety, and especially the safety of my residents because I didn't wanna unnecessarily expose them if I didn't have to. So there were a few different measures that we put in place. We tried to set systems up where residents could stay at home and they would only come to the hospital for urgent consult if necessary. And I actually spent more time in the hospital than I had before so I could sort of see and deal with the consults myself and, you know, just kind of going into the COVID units and dealing with patients.

Of course, you know, everyone needed an adequate supply of personal protective equipment. And that was an issue for a while, but luckily, I always had what I needed. And it's challenging. It touches you in a way because you feel incredibly sad because you see patients suffering and dealing with this illness, and they are dealing with this alone. And I say that they're dealing with it alone because we've restricted visitor access. So you have folks in hospitals all around dealing with this alone, without their family members being nearby, and I felt incredibly sad for them.

Host: So just tell me about life in New York City during this pandemic.

Dr. McNeil: Well, life in New York City has completely been turned upside down, so to speak, and it has changed. Luckily, most folks are following the social distancing guidelines and a number of businesses have shut down. So once buzzing streets are somewhat deserted. I'll tell you a funny story. You know, I kind of, live in Manhattan and I commute to Brooklyn to the hospital, and oftentimes I will catch the subway. But during this pandemic, I've avoided the subway, so I walk. So I probably walk about six, six-and-a-half miles from my home to the hospital and, one, I'm incredibly grateful for all of the first responders and the essential employees. I often see the same people on the street as I'm walking and will sort of wave, and say hello to each other. And, you know, it's just amazing to think that a buzzing busy metropolis is shut down in a lot of ways.

Host: Yeah, we've heard stories about healthcare providers who wear their scrubs on the street getting people randomly applauding them on the street. And then I think every night at 7:00 pm, there's been a communal cheer that goes out and that goes to the streets as a sign of appreciation to all the essential workers and healthcare providers. What's that been like being on the receiving end of some of those accolades?

Dr. McNeil: I tell you, that has been one of the greatest things about this experience. Of course, this is challenging, it's a stress on the world, people are suffering. There are other folks who are, you know, losing their lives, people are losing loved ones, but if you try to look at the bright side of things, I think that this is something that has brought us together in a way in which we were not before. You know, I feel a sense of camaraderie with, you know, fellow physicians from other services. And I also feel a greater connection to the community. You know, I felt, you know, appreciated before as a practitioner, but it's the appreciation that I feel right now whenever I walk the streets, whenever I see people, whether I know them or not, it's just tremendous. And you mentioned the applause that sometimes occurs at 7:00 most evenings, you know, people will sort of clap outside of their windows, and decks, and stuff

like that, and show appreciation for, you know, healthcare providers, whether it's respiratory therapists, nursing, support staff, physicians, you know, we're sort of all in this together, and there's a tremendous sense of community, unlike I've ever seen or experienced before .

Host: Tell me more about that sense of community. How are you and your colleagues coming together and supporting each other during this uncertain time?

Dr. McNeil: You know, we support each other in different ways. I think that this pandemic has also stressed the importance of communication. And sometimes we don't communicate as well as we need to. But during this time of crisis, we have over-communicated in a way. Within my department at Downstate, actually, we hold a town hall sort of morning check at three times a week, where we will sit around together on a Zoom call, and we will survey everyone just to do a check-in to see how everyone's feeling, to see how everyone's family's feeling, and also to update each other on necessary news regarding the crisis. So, it's something that's been great. And also, I'll fully disclose this to you and the rest of the urologic community, I actually got an executive MBA. I wrapped up Business School. And I didn't quite realize the importance of coaching. For some people, leadership is an 8, but for other folks, you can be coached to be a better leader. And during this time, I've employed the services of a professional coach and someone who sort of helps with crisis management. So, myself personally, I've had a weekly check-in with my coach, just to ensure that I'm doing okay and also to ensure that I'm leading well.

Host: Given all you've experienced so far, what advice and insight would you give to your colleagues around the world as they too manage through this COVID-19 pandemic?

Dr. McNeil: Kind of having perspective is important. And one sort of thing that comes to mind and I can't remember where I first saw this, I will not claim credit for this, it is not an original thought, it is something that I saw some time ago, and I adopted it. And this thing is, "Never be afraid of failing, but absolutely terrified of regret." And I'll sort of expand on that a bit. You know, dealing with this pandemic, being, you know, a healthcare practitioner, you know, we all sort of face some sort of fear. We wanna combat this virus and we wanna do what we can to help all of those who need it. But there is a little bit of fear. And also, there may be a fear of failing. And the way that I've combated that, my own, you know, fear of failing is that, you know, I'm gonna do all that I can to help those in need, and if I do make a mistake or fail in some way, as long as I sort of fail and fall forward, then that will keep me going and add to

the positive momentum that I've generated and the positive momentum that I share with, you know, all other healthcare providers during this time.

Host: As far as your medical training, what do you think best prepared you for this pandemic?

Dr. McNeil: Well, for that, I would have to go back to my residency training and my time as a surgical intern. I trained at the Loyola University Medical Center, just out of Chicago and Maywood, Illinois. And, you know, the rigors of the general surgery intern experience there gave me a lot of ICU experience, which believe it or not, I haven't lost that much of it over the years. So that's something that's been, you know, helpful, just kind of remembering how events work, how do you make [inaudible 00:09:54] adjustments and things of that nature. I haven't had to do much of that, you know, where I sit now, but I've understood certain things that have been done. So, I think that, you know, as a urologist, you know, we're surgeons, but we're also medical doctors in a way. You know, being a body plumber is a good thing and has provided me with a foundation to feel helpful during this crisis. And as I said before, we may be subspecialists, we're urologists, yeah, but we're physicians first, we're docs first.

Host: I know you told me you spoke last week on a webinar with some of your colleagues, with the Society of Academic Urology, how'd that go and what did you discuss on that webinar?

Dr. McNeil: That was actually great, just to come together and to share our experiences. I participated on a panel with two good friends of mine, Rich Lee, who's a urologist at Cornell. He's the program director there. And also Matthew Sorenson, who's the program director at the University of Washington. And our topic was entitled, "Covering the Front Lines: The Broad Impact of Redeployment." And we spoke about how we prepared for the COVID search at our individual institutions, deploying urologists, whether attending staff or residents to support other services. We spoke about picking up the pieces after the pandemic and lessons learned. So it was a great time just to share, and to connect, and to learn from each other, and learn from those in the community that shared their thoughts.

Host: What were some key lessons that you learned?

Dr. McNeil: For me, one thing that I think that we all need to focus on is mental health and personal wellness. And, you know, I don't think that we have always paid enough attention to that. And one of the key takeaways for me was mental preparedness and the importance of coaching your house staff or even your colleagues. If you think about it, no matter where you are in an

organization, you have to manage up, you have to manage at your same level, you have to manage down, and you have to manage yourself. And it's important to realize that, at times, we all face fear and uncertainty. You know, we all may have insecurities. We're all dealing with social isolation in this time. However, it's so important to see the opportunity in this, the opportunity to fulfill your calling as a physician, the opportunity to build confidence, and the opportunity to contribute to an effort to combat something, unlike anything we've seen in our lifetimes.

Host: Dr. McNeil, do you have anything else to add or any other final thoughts before we wrap up today's interview?

Dr. McNeil: I'd just like to say that, to anyone who's listening to us, please, you know, just keep going. This is a challenging time. It's tough. There's some good days, there's some bad days, but folks really need you, people out there really appreciate what you're doing, and we are all in this together, all of us. We're all in this together. And while this is a challenging illness that we're facing, I believe that humankind, worldwide, we can come together, and I think that we will be adjusting to a new normal in a way but I sort of remain confident that in some ways, we will be better off on the other side because of the lessons that we learned during this time.

Host: Dr. Brian McNeil, a urologist with SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University in Brooklyn, New York. Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. McNeil, and thank you for all you're doing there in New York City.

Dr. McNeil: Thanks, it was great to catch up, Casey .