

# From Behind the Curtain to Physician with a Nerve of Steel-Transition of an Anaesthesiologist During the Pandemic

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## How to cite this article:

Ashish Nair. From Behind the Curtain to Physician with a Nerve of Steel-Transition of an Anaesthesiologist During the Pandemic. *Ind J Anesth Analg.* 2024; 11(3):169-171.

## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic, Anaesthesia has emerged among the most sought-after specialty in modern medicine. The timing was perfect with all the limelight on the “men of the hour” we the anaesthesiologist have even adorned ‘Times’ magazine cover yet refusing to stand out and bask in the glory and satisfaction of being the ‘heroes behind the screen’.

One might ask me what do you really do as an anaesthesiologist and I would say ‘I can take you close to death and bring you back alive’. Yes, we do put people to sleep but we also do ensure that the patient wakes up as if it was all a dream.

We have become the frontline warriors in this brutal battle against the COVID pandemic and our job have become even more dangerous as we are now working in close proximity to the deadly COVID-19 virus with the possibility of even a slight mishap from our side to cost us our lives.

We share the burden of labour of an anaesthesiologist as well as the physician by joining



Fig. 1: (Source: <https://time.com/collection/coronavirus-heroes>)<sup>1</sup>

forces in the ICUs, isolation wards and fever clinics. The anaesthesiologist today has to play the role of a fine physician and intensivist weighing the indications and risks involved with each procedure. From the task of stabilizing the most critical patients to securing their airways and successfully keeping death at bay has been accepted as a challenge even in the dire situations with minimal equipment. As an anaesthesiologist, identifying and classifying procedures as aerosol generating procedures like tracheal intubation, non-invasive ventilation, high flow nasal oxygen flow, bronchial suctioning, bronchoscopy and sputum induction will be a necessary step to ensure safety for the OT personnel on either side of the sterile screen.

The Pandemic has propagated the idea of social distancing to such an extent that even the surgeons keep safe distance from the patients, but alas we are not bound by the laws of social distancing as

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**Received on:** 22.04.2024

**Accepted on:** 27.09.2024

we are always in close proximity patient's airway. With the increasing number of critical patients we are not at great risk but we also put our loved ones at risk. One might ask 'is this all worth it' to which an anaesthesiologist would say with a smile on his face "It's my duty".

Yes! We the duty bound and sleepless warriors put our lives at stake to achieve our goals and that is to mark our victory over this crucial fight against COVID-19. The efforts and dedication put in by the anaesthetist to save one life even with such a disease at play truly is commendable. One might say 'stand back!' the anaesthesiologist is here to fight the dreadful virus, they truly are "Physicians with the nerves of steel".

With erratic work schedule, sleepless night shifts, long hours of standing and running around in the ICU, one ignores the throbbing pain that starts to creep up our legs. These have become the new normal in the life of an anaesthesiologist. We are engrossed so much into our work that we have ignored both our physical and mental health. Anaesthesiologists have a vast skill set which makes them valuable during emergencies for securing the airway, cardiopulmonary resuscitation and intensive care management. However, the most valuable procedures they perform has made them most vulnerable to the virus attack.

Since the COVID era has set in, instead of 'work from home' we decided to tackle this deadly virus in our own battle ground. Leaving aside the concerns of our own family and health we stood up to the challenges put in front of us and came up with different techniques to make our work as smooth as possible.

As Sir Albert Einstein once said, "you have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else". Yes indeed! safety comes first and we anaesthesiologists have broken all the prejudiced barriers and come up with so many ideas which has revolutionized our working ethics and create a 'safe working environment' in our operation theatres.

Starting from laying down working rules and regulations in the COVID OT to donning and doffing drills for the personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, to techniques to minimise aerosol formation like the intubating box, newer techniques of intubation, cost effective and portable ventilators and many other innovative steps from our fellow anaesthesiologists.

One might argue why not let the robots and artificial intelligence take over, well that's

absolutely not happening! As our senior faculty told us on the first day of residency, intubation



Fig. 2: (Source: <https://covid19.klick.com/projects/box>)<sup>2</sup>

is a skill, not very difficult to acquire, but only the real experience and judgement will tell you when to extubate! The adrenaline surge that every anaesthetist gets with each case he/she induces even after 20-30 years of work experience teaches him/her something new which later reflects as an 'intuition'. In my 3 years of PG I have learnt it the hard way, the intuition of a senior anaesthetist can often be more useful than a 24 hour critical monitoring of a patient, so definitely no robot can ever replace a senior anaesthesiologist!

Contrarily, there's a silver lining for India as a country amidst all the tumult. As all the major medical fraternities around the world collapsed during this pandemic, India somehow managed to maintain its status eventhough being a developing country. Grim as it may be, the present situation represents a big opportunity for new manufacturing set ups - both domestic and overseas relocation units. A quick reboot of the medical system and with economic support to the Indian pharmaceutical companies and other medical manufacturing units, India can rise to its potential and provide the world a shining example. If the government succeeds in supporting this, then "Make in India" can change the face of our economy and medical units in the long run. In other words, we'll be one of the few growing economies in the world; and would be set to attract a lion's share of the stimulus-fuelled global liquidity that abounds today.



Fig. 3: (Source: <https://www.pinterest.es/pin/504051383298841919>)<sup>3</sup>

Fresh to the branch, I feel Anaesthesia and critical care management has a bright future! Apart from providing anaesthesia for surgery we will emerge as care givers in every field of medicine and pain management, making life saving intervention possible in each and every case ensuring that the health care system reaches new heights!

Yes! we are 'the men of the hour'  
We are the heroes behind the curtain.  
We are Physicians with the nerves of steel!!!

#### WEBLINK

1. <https://time.com/collection/coronavirus-heroes>
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