

Working Through the Pandemic: True Confessions

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Wow, can you get at it quickly when your proper attire is a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt.

“Human beings are social creatures. We are social not in the trivial sense that we like company, and not just in the obvious sense that we depend on others. We are social in a more elemental way: simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people.”

— Atul Gawande

No question our human interactions have gotten a little rusty over the past year. As we contemplate a return to “normal,” I’ve been comparing our current work situation to what it will hopefully come back to. Anyone else ready to confess their pandemic work practices? Anybody? Anybody at all?

Okay. I will.

I have been fortunate enough to be able to read mostly remotely. Those trips to the hospital during peak surge were mind-bending and heart-wrenching (to say nothing of scary); NYC became something hard to comprehend. People hate to hear, “You had to be there,” but it is so true.

Working remotely has become a norm and a relief from all that stress; reading from home is a whole ‘nother kettle of fish, as my father would say.

I still do read cases. It is the *fashion* in which I read that is of note. Perhaps that would be even better stated as the *lack of fashion* in which I read.

I have an alarm set for about 5 minutes before I’m supposed to start working. That’s plenty of time to rub the sleep out of your eyes, get some coffee on, and get the workstation powered up. Things I do **NOT** need time for in pandemic mode? Showering, combing my hair and other personal hygiene action items, getting dressed, commuting, etc.

Wow, can you get at it quickly when your proper attire is a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. You don’t want to see me on Zoom, however. My hair is a fright. I’ve got two or three sweatpants/sweatshirt combos to rotate through. None match. If I need to conference, I’ll put on a shirt but leave the sweatpants on and wear a hat. Perhaps not the confident, fashionable man I could be, but rest assured, I am comfortable.

It is quiet here. I still love music on (always have, always will), and there’s some jazz in the air. But there are **NO** clinicians rounding behind me, **NO** foot traffic coming in for the reading room coffee, **NO** phone calls at a rate of 150 to 200 per hour, **NO** printers spewing out worklists for the techs, **NO** constant chatter among the residents/fellows/nurses, and **NO** hospital overhead pages or announcements. I generate most of the noise myself calling people about cases.

There are few distractions, and I have come to appreciate how bothersome distractions can be. Are distractions a source of errors? You bet. Not having to filter the million other things that are going on around me is a key advantage.

My home PACS setup is top-notch. And, since I am not sharing this workstation with anyone else on any other shift (IT’S MINE!), I don’t have to constantly readjust the height of the first monitor and the angle of the second monitor, or find the microphone, fiddle with my chair, kick cables out of the way, and wonder about the sticky stuff on the keyboard. Everything in its place.

I select my own snacks and coffee, and I don’t have to share them with **anyone**. Those clinicians who come down to “review a case,” and ask, “hey, is that chocolate?” are nowhere to be found.

Please note: I love being at the hospital, reading with the residents and fellows, and handling consultations in person. There are so, so many things I miss from pre-pandemic times, like eating out, impromptu meetings, shaking hands, seeing people’s faces, crowded city streets, and on and on.

But there are distinct advantages to reading remotely, and my job satisfaction has grown, not fallen, during this odd time. So long as we can still serve our patients well remotely, so be it.

I’ll be Dr Sweats.

Stay safe. Get vaccinated.

Keep doing that good work. Mahalo.

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