

JOSHUA SCHOEN, MD '02

From OR to ICU

ANESTHESIOLOGIST JOSHUA SCHOEN, MD '02, SPENT THE PANDEMIC INTUBATING COVID PATIENTS

At Nyack Hospital, located 25 miles outside Manhattan, all elective procedures were halted on March 12. "We had admitted our first few patients with COVID-19 and then saw the surge very quickly after that," says Joshua Schoen, MD '02, assistant director of anesthesia.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo asked all New York hospitals to increase capacity by 50 percent. Nyack Hospital came up with a plan to increase capacity by 100 percent, converting operating and recovery rooms into ICUs, and using an emergency room that was undergoing renovation as an emergency department ICU.

"We're a small community hospital, but the response from our administration and staff was phenomenal," Schoen says. "Everybody pulled together to put together this action plan. At our peak we had five ICUs in operation."

With no elective surgeries, physicians from different specialties were recruited to help out in the ICU as much as possible. Dr. Schoen stepped in to volunteer as an intensivist. "Intubating a COVID patient is a high-risk procedure with exposure to the airway a big concern," he says. "We wanted the most experienced people doing the intubations, which for the most part, were anesthesiologists."

At the peak of the pandemic, the hospital had 200 COVID patients with 70 intubated. "There was a short period of time where we used anesthesia machines as ventilators," he says.

Normally, Schoen says, anesthesiologists are on call at the hospital for 24 hours. But during the peak of COVID, it became simply too much. "I would go in at 5 p.m. and work until 7 a.m., sometimes intubating 10 to 12 patients during that time," he says. "Often the biggest challenge was running from room to room taking PPE off and on."

Fortunately, he says his hospital never had a serious shortage of PPE. "They even got us the PAPR positive airflow respirators," he says.

While not all of his partners used them, Schoen says he wore his all the time. With a wife and four children at home, he was always acutely aware of the risk.

"Being in the ICU and intubating patients, there was zero chance of not being exposed," he says. "I told my wife up front I thought there was an 80 percent chance that at some point I would become infected and get sick."

In the beginning, he says he would shower immediately when he got home from work and wouldn't touch his kids. "It was really traumatic," he says.

But over time, he saw that his colleagues weren't getting sick. "It seemed like the PPE and the hand washing was really working," he says. "Out of 100 medical staff, only two or three people got sick, and fortunately, only with minor symptoms."

Schoen had a negative antibody test in May and a negative COVID test in June, when his hospital began performing elective surgeries again. "We're slowly ramping up. We started at 25 percent capacity and by July hope to be at our regular elective schedule," he says. "With social distancing, you just can't bring patients in as quickly. You can't have them as close to each other. It's complicated, just like everything else. You've got to think three steps ahead."

As of early June, there were only nine COVID patients in the hospital. "I've only intubated one patient in the last three weeks," he says. "We're getting back to doing more of what we usually do."

Schoen says the pandemic is the most impactful experience of his medical career. "This is like nothing I'd ever done before or ever want to do again in my life," he says. "I really love anesthesia but I made a very conscious decision when I was a resident not to do an ICU fellowship."

The silver lining, he says, was to see how his hospital administrators and colleagues pulled together and adjusted their practices to make a difference for patients during a very difficult and scary time.

"We were scared of this thing in the beginning—not that we're not scared of it now—but we really came together and worked as a team to fight this," Schoen says. "I'm proud to have been part of that effort."

—Renée Gearhart Levy



Joshua Schoen, MD '02