

Virtual Reality...COVID-style

Richard Gerald Harris, MD

President, LUGPA; UroPartners, Melrose Park, IL

[Rev Urol. 2020;22(3):124–125]

© 2020 MedReviews®, LLC

For most of this year, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) has been in the dialogue. Whether it be TV or print news or discussions amongst us, we are trying to get information and navigate our way through this pandemic. Although there is some COVID-19 fatigue from the 24/7 news cycle, as urologists we need to understand how COVID-19 has affected us and what we need to do going forward. Questions remain as to how we maintain our practices and stay productive while keeping patients and staff safe. LUGPA has taken an aggressive role in providing copious information relating to this situation.

By now, I am sure you are up and running with telemedicine. Back in March, everything changed in the blink of the eye. We had to pivot quickly and learn a whole new way of taking care of patients. People are calling it a “Sputnik moment” — an event that makes people collectively say that they need to *do something*, setting us in a new direction. That sounds about right. When it comes to telehealth, our *capabilities* have not changed; we have had the technical *ability* to connect with patients virtually. We just have not had the opportunity to fully implement this technology until now.

With the loosening of Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services regulations regarding telemedicine in response to the coronavirus, practices pivoted to mostly virtual visits in the early days of the pandemic. This was much preferred compared with the idea of consulting with patients in-person while wearing a hazmat suit. LUGPA’s website experienced a spike in traffic in late March when we offered a series of webinars on telemedicine and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security

(CARES) Act. If you need a refresher, these sessions are still available as on-demand content on LUGPA’s website (bit.ly/LUGPA-C19).

After those successful programs, LUGPA quickly developed additional programming. In June, we launched a web series entitled “Stay Connected: Business as *UnUsual*.” LUGPA Board member Alan D. Winkler, MHSA, moderated the first episode, which examined the opportunities found at the center of the COVID-19 crisis. An open dialog format allowed participants to join the conversation and share their best-practices solutions to the “new normal.” Is everyone performing antigen tests on their employees? How often? What do you do when an employee tests positive? How do you deal with staffing schedules? I found out that although some have embraced a 1 week on/1 week off schedule that has alleviated physician burnout, others encounter physicians and other employees begging to come back to work.

Also discussed were opportunities for efficiency and revenue growth after the COVID-19 crises have abated. For example, some participants mentioned that infertility visits were handled more efficiently via telehealth and that that was something they would continue in the long term. Communication efforts were ramped up to get information on safety measures to patients and employees. Eblasts, social media posts, and the use of internal intranet sites were all discussed in detail. Ideas abounded. Many discussed different approaches to patient flow including floor stickers, restaurant buzzer systems, and texts to patients waiting in parking lots. There was no lack of innovative solutions. Not every

solution works for every practice, but the candid flow of conversation certainly got my wheels turning.

Employee processes that were inefficient have been exposed and amended. Employees were re-educated about uploading patient charts before visits, eliminating redundancies in our check-in processes. LUGPA members can go to lugpa.org/stay-connected-series to view the archived episodes.

If you are looking for something that addresses the clinical changes, challenges, and opportunities emerging from the COVID crisis, LUGPA just wrapped up its “After the Storm” webinar series. Evan R. Goldfischer, MD, moderated this five-part series that highlights new and emerging treatments for prostate cancer, bladder cancer, erectile dysfunction, and medical spa services.

This summer, LUGPA also made its signature educational events available via virtual platforms instead of the usual in-person meetings. The Regional Meetings, the Resident Summit, and LUGPA’s

Annual Meeting were reworked to fit an online format. Although very successful, we wistfully remembered the camaraderie of our traditional events. Gone were the friendly handshakes, lively receptions, long dinners, and novel social events. No late-night dancing. No fancy dresses. I feel like Charlie Brown holding his fist in the air after the last ball game: “Just wait until next year!”

I look forward to LUGPA’s 12th Annual Meeting, which will be held virtually on November 6-7, 2020. It will contain the usual valuable content geared specifically for independent urology practitioners, including sessions on cybersecurity, how to manage angry patients, physician practice benchmarking, recruiting, and health policy updates, plus a new interactive open mic session entitled “What Keeps You Up at Night?”

I am especially excited to hear the Keynote Address from Olympic hockey gold medal winner Jim Craig. The 1980 USA Olympic hockey team’s victory over the

seemingly unbeatable Soviet Union team is regarded as one of the most extraordinary sports victories of all time. (The “Miracle on Ice,” as it is known, even has its own Wikipedia page!) Jim has parlayed his incredible work ethic and determination into an impressive career, translating many of the essential teamwork principles from the Olympics into successful business methods. I hope you join me at this virtual event. LUGPA members can register at lugpa.org/annual.

As we continue to cope with our new COVID-19 reality, we have learned that our association is resilient and has added value to our members’ practices. From practical information on the Paycheck Protection Program loans to ways to extend the services your group offers even during the COVID-19 crisis, we are proud of the advances that we have made and continue to make on behalf our members. LUGPA remains a strong voice, working with and for you to preserve the integrity of independent medicine. ■