

Hi, everyone, good day! I'm Lauren and I'm an early career physio or PT currently based in the Philippines. I'm here today to share a little bit about my experience in the past 20 months since the pandemic started and how it has changed and molded my personal practice. I think the best place to start is right at the beginning, so, let me tell you a little bit about where I was in March of 2020.

Back then, I was already working at the **Philippine General Hospital (PGH)**, which is a public, tertiary hospital that stands as the national university hospital and the state government referral center of the country. And since I live in a third world, developing country, where public and charity services are widely needed, we were almost always at full capacity. As a staff Physical Therapist there, we would rotate in different in- and out-patient clinics, handling an average of 8-12 patients a day with any variety of cases which ranged from musculo/ortho/trauma cases, stroke and other neurological conditions, pediatric and neurodevelopmental cases, and other specialized conditions like cardiac, vestibular, visual, and pulmonary cases. On top of that, we would be supervising interns from different schools. So, to give you a picture of our workload: we were around 20 staff PTs, we had 25 interns in a month, and each of us had around 5-12 patients a day. Basically, it was a lot of patients, a lot of interns, and a lot of staff on site. This was our normal every day.

Then, the pandemic hit us. The first to be pulled out by their universities were the interns and it wasn't as easy as just closing some clinics. We were down by almost half of our working therapists, but the same number of patients were still there and needed to be seen. The remaining staff PTs were definitely not enough to cover that number of patients. Right at the start, in that first week, there was already a huge challenge for us and many lessons to be learned.

- First, for me this really highlighted the importance of having **flexibility as a physical therapist** and having general knowledge of different cases. We had to cover so many patients, even without prior notice. It was so hectic that PTs were coordinating by the hour on who was available to cover which clinic. So having that ability to be able to recognize common cases and build on a referral was so important. Of course, I'm not saying you should have it all textbook memorized because that isn't realistic and is not expected of you in the workplace. But, as early as now, take steps to expose yourself to as many learning opportunities in various cases as you can so that you can build your repertoire and experience.
- Next, it's important to hone your **empathic communication skills**. As PTs, we always need this skill when talking with patients and caregivers but especially in cases like this. Imagine, patients were afraid or confused because they didn't understand what was happening. Some of our patients had travelled from far away provinces to be able to avail of charity services. And some patients, of course, only had their own recovery and treatment in their minds. We had to be able to relate to these patients and explain to them clearly, non-threateningly, and kindly about how we might have to cancel or reschedule sessions, how we might have to close the clinics in the future. Poor empathic communication skills and a "just business" tone would have resulted to conflicts, complaints, and even maybe feelings of abandonment on their end. And of course, we didn't want that for our patients.
- Lastly, for our section, what made our transitions and planning easier at this point was having a **strong core managerial team** who could discuss and make decisions on how to move forward with clinic operations with the best intentions of everyone involved. If we didn't have that back then, trying to come up with action plans would have been chaotic. So, as early career professionals, I encourage you to look to join spaces where the teamwork is good, and the decision making is sound. And if you are in a place where there is neither of that yet, then maybe you can take the first steps to build that.

So, moving forward, what happened next? PGH was then designated to be national COVID referral center of the country and our PT clinics were closed indefinitely. Instead, we were then called to take on a different role: being safety officers for the COVID wards. We were in charge of enforcing safety protocols and proper disinfection procedures and the health and safety of our COVID staff was in our hands. This was something entirely outside of

our field of work and required additional training and preparation. This was all just when the pandemic was starting so it was such a critical period for healthcare workers.

- Assuming the role of safety officers really highlighted for me how **even when you start working, you must always still be learning**. You should be open to taking on different roles and different tasks. Even when you are unsure, even when you think you might not be ready.
- This was one of those times. Imagine, in the face of an almost unknown virus, at a time when we knew almost nothing about it except that it spread quickly and that there were people dying, we were suddenly being called upon to be at the frontlines. We needed to assume roles that were expected of us in our profession. We needed to **be brave**. This was the era of seeing overworked, overfatigued healthcare workers who were sweating down to their bones because of the hazmats and extensive PPEs. This was the era of HCWs being separated and isolated from our families. We were facing unknown challenges every day, and even now, even when we know so much more about the virus, even when the vaccine exists to protect us, I know that there are still some of us afraid and anxious, but we need to be brave for our patients and co-workers.
- It's definitely easier said than done but one thing that sort of builds on your bravery is **having service at the heart of your practice**. Because like I said, everything that we do and the services we provide at the frontlines is for our patients. It's so that we can help them recover and return to their families. And if you put that at the center of your practice, then the daily grind becomes a little more fulfilling and a little less daunting.

Eventually, after a few months as safety officers, we were called back to our duties as PTs. We began NON-COVID inpatient care, and eventually COVID patient care. The role itself was familiar but the skills had changed and developed to accommodate for the still-present risk of COVID around us.

- Which is why, I want to highlight a constant in our profession: **Evidenced based practice**. This really helped in bridging the gap in the face of any new endeavor. It helped me understand symptoms under the COVID sequelae that I was not familiar with. Sometimes I needed a quick refresh on some treatments that I maybe didn't focus on in my previous practice like what are the best and most effective breathing exercises, chest expansion exercises, etc. Interestingly, we also had to delve into research about disinfection protocols, occupational health and safety, etc. The research surrounding COVID— its symptoms, its prognosis, its treatment—is developing every day, and your practice should evolve with it as well.
- This past year, with the birth of telerehabilitation and the remote learning setting, **my creativity, resourcefulness, and clinical thinking** as a PT were all challenged. Pre-pandemic, we did not have this at all, everything was face to face. It was an entirely different setting with so many difficult challenges which I am sure some also already know. How do we translate our profession— which is a very physical and tactile profession— into a remote setting? How do you teach a parent through a videocall how to properly handle their kids? How do you modify assistive devices and other exercises equipment that the patient doesn't have? How do I modify exercises so that they can still be done safely even if I'm not physically there to guard my patient? Trying to explore these different new settings will bring new opportunities to expand your practice.
- In fact, my advice is that now is the time **hone your initiative**. Our practice, your setting is evolving. Contribute to that change. Take opportunities to speak up, ask questions, and influence. Now's the best time to start building on your organizational and leadership skills.

So, that brings me back to now, in 2021. It's been a year and a half. We have somehow settled into our "new normal". We're actually still not back at 100% yet: we're still in teams working on and offsite, we still don't have face-to-face training for our interns, we're still handling a decreased patient load, we're still wearing at least level 3 PPEs, and in my country, the cases are still at an all-time high. The PT work, it's become familiar and routine. But the challenge now, in the long run, is combatting the emotional fatigue from the tiring year we've all had. So, in this last part of my talk I want to focus now on how to keep yourself holistically healthy:

- First, it's easy to forget to take care of yourself when you are so busy taking care of other people. So, this is just a reminder that you should still **prioritize your own health and safety**. Maintaining proper disinfection and health safety protocols are important. I know it's tiring but don't be lazy! Invest in healthy eating, proper nutrition, and regular exercise as well.
- Additionally, **maintain a healthy work-life balance**. The work we do is physically, emotionally, and mentally draining. It could lead to burnout and compassion fatigue if all your efforts go into your work alone. Find your purpose that exists outside of work. It could be spending time with your family, taking up a new hobby, exploring your creativity, or maybe starting a new personal project. Have something that inspires you outside of work, and it will help in building your resilience in the long run.
- I mentioned avoiding **compassion fatigue** earlier and if you're not familiar with this, I suggest you look into it because this usually takes a toll on early career professionals. So, as early as now, you have to build boundaries between your purpose to help your patient grow versus over attaching yourself to them. It should be clear in your mind and in your practice how to allow yourself to care for your patient with full support without taking on the emotional burden or pain of that patient's recovery. We don't want to anchor our own motivations and emotions on our patients' progress alone because we handle a lot of them and a variety of them, and they might not all turn out the way you wish it would.
- And lastly, have **patience** with yourself. You are growing through a pandemic. Things are not perfect, and you are learning. You are just starting out as well. Remember that "the beginnings are always the hardest part" but it does get better. Have patience in the pace you are taking in this pandemic. Some plans might have been derailed; some things might be moving slower than you thought they would. Just be patient, it will all work out.

That's been 10 minutes' worth of some of the learning experiences I've had in the past year. I know it's really something else, trying to start out while we're in the middle of a pandemic, but I hope that you look at these challenges as opportunities to grow instead of just hardships. Remember, "a smooth sea never made a skilled sailor." Thank you for giving me your time and for letting me share my insights with you. I look forward to the day when we can all hopefully meet, collaborate, and work together on future projects. Thank you!