

I have been a BSN, RN for 12 years as a geriatric specialist. As a nurse who works with patients who are in their senior years, one of the tenets of my practice, is that patients have the absolute right to self-determination. When that right is stripped from them, the impacts are profound. During Covid, the horror of the Public Health guidelines were unbearable. My patients who were happy, engaged senior citizens, suddenly had their rights ripped away and became prisoners. They were isolated in their rooms, unable to see anyone except for staff, regardless if they were symptomatic. If a positive test result was found in the building, whether a patient was ill or not, they were all locked in their rooms like errant children.

I watched as fear and confusion manifested as my beloved patients realized they could no longer leave their rooms, have visitors, go on outings, or even dine together socially as was custom. Families were denied entrance, church services ceased and activities were contained in their rooms. Constitutional rights, as well as simple human rights, suddenly evaporated as their homes became prison cells.

I watched my patients, who had previously been active, engaged, happy people, turn into frightened, confused and lonely prisoners. The angst was palpable in the air. Family visits were forbidden. The friendly smiling faces of staff were hidden behind masks. Meals were eaten in solitude. Even Physical therapy visits were restricted to simple range of movement at bedside instead of ambulation and free movement.

I witnessed one woman who was accustomed to going out on trips with friends, become incapacitated. She became depressed and debilitated. After a month of isolation, she could no longer walk at all and had to use a wheelchair. As time progressed, she could no longer stand up on her own, just to get out of bed. She went from being continent to incontinent. As her mental state collapsed she was unable to function. She stopped reading and writing. She stopped eating and drinking altogether. When I would enter her room, she would ask me if I was going to kill her today, which eventually changed from a question to a request, then a demand. I literally watched the sparkle fade from her eyes.

This woman is one example of many. In a facility with approximately 100 patients, the majority were severely impacted. Many died in this state of hopelessness. My beloved patients cried and begged to see their loved ones, their spiritual leaders or even therapy dogs. The ones who were confused on admission became completely incoherent. Their pleas for freedom went unheard. Their need for social interaction became irrelevant as CMS handed down directives. One of the worst aspects of this was that there was no one who would listen as I reported my patients' decline and subsequent deaths. I screamed into the abyss, and silence was all that replied. Feigned helplessness and blind adherence to the "Rules", by the very people who were mandated to protect patients, by

law. The role of prison guard was thrust upon nurses and staff, who overnight were ordered to violate the very laws they were trained to follow.

There is no adequate way to convey the impact on me professionally and personally. I carry a weight that no human should have to bear. I am enraged with frustration and grief that can never heal, knowing that as a protector and advocate, I completely failed in my responsibility to protect my patients. A part of me died during this time as I witnessed the utter destruction of the souls of the people that I loved. The horror of realization, that I could not affect any change to the situation, is something I pray that no other human ever experiences and I will carry it to my grave.

I should never have had to tell a family member, that their loved one died without their presence because of a cold virus. I should never have had to be the last face that a patient saw as they died, instead of their daughters, sons and grandchildren. I should never have had to be the one to be bound to enforce arbitrary rules, that completely countermanded my role as a healer. And I should never have had to witness and feel the level of despair that my patients bore as their rights were ripped from them.

As a nurse, who cares deeply about my fellow human beings, I implore you all to really listen to my testimony as I speak for the dead whom the system ignored. I personally would rather die than have my freedom taken away by any entity, which is exactly what happened to an incalculable number of people.

This situation can never be allowed to happen again, no matter what the potential risk. I can, with absolute certainty, attest that my patients would have given anything to make their own choices during Covid rather than someone else deciding their fate.