

My father, Karl Lohmann, tested positive for COVID-19 on October 1, 2021. On October 7, his oxygen plummeted to 82, and he was admitted to Lehigh Valley Hospital–Pocono. Before treatment began, we had a doctor contact the attending physician and warn, “Under no circumstances should this patient be given Remdesivir,” explaining that my father had only 30% kidney function, and Remdesivir was contraindicated in such cases. The response was, “I’ll let the patient decide,” before he hung up on our doctor. But my father had no real choice, as the hospital refused to offer him anything else.

His condition quickly deteriorated while our family was locked out. When I was finally allowed in, a nurse told me he likely had 24 hours or less to live. I was horrified. In just days, my father had become skin and bones, and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth from apparent neglect. I desperately tried to advocate for him, but every request was denied, including budesonide treatments via nebulizer. Despite high-flow oxygen, the inflammation in his lungs was so severe that he still couldn’t get enough air. I watched him desperately reposition himself, searching for pockets of air. “Isn’t there more they can do? I can’t breathe!” he cried. All I could tell him was, “No, Dad. All they will do is put you on a ventilator, and we know what happens with that.”

That night, his oxygen dropped to 70, and nobody came. I ran through the halls searching for help and found someone who appeared to be a nurse. I told her my dad needed help. She flatly replied, “I’m not allowed in that room.” I begged her to find someone who was, as there was clearly no urgency. The next day, I asked that he be retested and removed from COVID isolation. It had been 12 days since his positive test. The nurse refused, and told me she didn’t know of a single person placed in isolation that was taken out of it. WHAT??

Somehow, my dad held on for 36 hours, hoping the pulmonologist arriving the next morning might offer another treatment. There wasn’t one. He was told the only remaining option was a ventilator, which would simply delay the inevitable. So my dad chose to die “naturally.” On October 14, 2021, he took his last labored breath.

Have you ever watched someone suffocate to death? I have. And I will carry those images with me for the rest of my life.

I walked out of that hospital determined not to let my father’s fate become the fate of others. I connected COVID patients with doctors who treated them as outpatients, with a 100% success rate. One case involved a woman with COVID pneumonia confirmed by X-ray, whose oxygen dropped to 70 and would not rise. With access to medications, supplements, and lung steroids such as budesonide, the treatment my father had been denied, she survived. A month later, her follow-up technician was shocked to find her lungs crystal clear.

That experience changed me forever. My father deserved that chance. Others deserved it, too.

I cannot bring my dad back. But I can refuse to let his death become just another statistic. I will continue to speak for patients whose voices are silenced and for their loved ones who remain. Every person deserves access to every reasonable treatment option and the dignity of fighting for their life with the people they love beside them.

My father's life mattered. His suffering mattered. And his story will not be forgotten.