

My husband and I are physicians in Georgia. In April 2020, my husband was deployed to the very first pandemic hotspot in Albany, Ga as co-commander of a medical task force to care for the critically ill. In December of 2020, my parents, John and Pat Booher, contracted COVID-19. They quarantined at home for 10 days before my father's condition necessitated hospitalization. On New Year's Day 2021, my mother took him to Piedmont ER in ATL. He was taken from her via wheelchair, and after parking the car, my mom was denied access to the hospital at all. After 50 years of marriage, he was whisked away through ER doors. She never saw him again. He died 12 days later on the 12th of January 2021. After sacrificing everything to care for the sickest, when COVID came for my own father, the same medical system we had served denied him the most basic human care of all. He was allowed no visitors. He died alone. While nurses, advanced practice providers, respiratory therapists, physician assistants, janitors, and food service workers went in his room repeatedly, with appropriate protective gear. It was prohibited for a loved one to do the same. A loved one who also had the virus and had been with him for the 10 prior days of his infection.

When my Dad realized that he was dying, he asked for us. He requested family prayer, as our Christian belief is that where two or more are gathered in His name, He is with you. He was denied that request as hospital policy was zero visitation for COVID patients. My dad didn't ask for a luxury. He asked for the spiritual comfort that had guided his life. He asked for the people he loved to gather, pray, and accompany him as he faced death. That request was denied. His last words to his wife of 50 years... "I love you. Goodbye" happened via a phone call.

Ironically, I am a physician with hospital privileges in the same hospital system that kept my dad from me. Had I been called to consult on a COVID patient, I could have entered a COVID room with PPE, but because it was a personal interaction, it was prohibited. We would get update calls from the attendings that he was crying and "does he have a history of depression or mental illness?" My Dad was a stoic, faithful, joyful man. I had never seen him cry. I had never seen him joyless. The hospital policies led him down that path of despair.

After his death, I sued the hospital for violating his religious liberties and constitutional rights. No hospital administrator should have a legal right to prevent a family from praying a loved one into heaven. After a lengthy legal battle at massive personal cost, a judge dismissed the case, not because it had no merit, but because hospitals were deemed immune from any COVID-related claims. In our review of records, it was determined that he was denied access to a bathroom and even to water before dying. His course of care was abysmal. His last days were torturous. My family will never recover from losing that right. We will never recover from knowing that this wonderful and faithful man was forsaken in his last days by a system his daughter was a part of. A system that should first do no harm did the most harm to a loving family that deserved none of it. Please enact hospital visitation protections that guarantee, even during public health emergencies, patients maintain their human rights. My father was denied that. No one else should be.