On and off the wards, residents face limited holiday celebration

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Liz Southworth, MD, had planned to spend the two-week break she took during the holidays of her first-year as a medical resident sunning and sightseeing in South Africa. Instead—with the pandemic and her residency commitments making travel abroad imprudent—she was in the lukewarm-on-a-good-day Chicago suburbs spending Thanksgiving with her family and boyfriend.

“We initially had the trip planned for after Match Day,” said Dr. Southworth, a first-year ob-gyn resident at Michigan Medicine and AMA member. “It very quickly became clear that that was a nonviable option, and lo and behold, we are still in the midst of a pandemic. Someday, probably not anytime soon, we’ll go to South Africa.”

Holidays, even in normal times, tend to tax medical residents with longer shifts and the inability to travel to celebrate with loved ones. During the pandemic—when Dr. Southworth had to go through several rounds of COVID-19 testing just to see her family—the lack of an outlet can further exasperate the situation.

“It’s, of course, good we didn’t go” to South Africa, Dr. Southworth said. “It means that we aren’t taking the risk of traveling. But, on the other hand, these precious days we have off are really opportunities to refresh and rejuvenate. The pandemic has affected our ability to disconnect from work and reenergize.”

Holidays and caution

Dr. Southworth decided to return to her family’s home for Thanksgiving because of her ready access to COVID-19 testing. Even then, she and her boyfriend maintained distance from her mother and stepfather at the house and they limited their Thanksgiving meal to the four of them eating at separate tables.

Her concerns in going home were the same many residents are likely to confront this holiday season.
Mainly, the question she believes all physicians should ask themselves: Is it safe for me to see family?

“Ultimately, my main concern was would bring it home because I am in contact with asymptomatic COVID patients,” Dr. Southworth said. “I think having testing readily available has allowed me to make a more informed decision. I was able to get tested before going home and will get tested before returning to work.”

Learn what doctor’s wish patients new about holiday gatherings this year.

**Christmas caps**

Because she was able to take her time off around Thanksgiving, Dr. Southworth anticipates being in the hospital on Christmas and either New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day. Keeping up the holiday spirit on the wards is a team effort, she said. Plans have been made to exchange gifts and wear holiday-themed scrub caps.

“A lot of my co-residents are going to be working during the holidays,” she said. “We’re doing all those little things people like to do with their family in our residency. We are doing a secret Santa, which will be fun.”

It’s not just residents who are missing holidays, Dr. Southworth pointed out. Academic faculty members are on the wards supervising residents.

“They do a really nice job of being excited to be with us during the holidays,” she said. “I’m sure they’d also prefer to be with their family in a time when they might be missing out on their kids opening presents. I really appreciate the familial aspect of residency. It doesn’t end with just the residents. I’m lucky to be at a program where the faculty feel like family.”

The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.