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July 2021

Oral History with Patty Kubala

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Recommended Citation

Ruybal, Zachary Kevin and Kubala, Patty W., "Oral History with Patty Kubala" (2021). *Humboldt in the Time of COVID - Digital Archive*. 75.

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What is my day to day life like?

Well I am the Clinical coordinator for what was St. Joe's and prior to that Eureka Internal Medicine. Two years ago St Joseph's was bought by Providence Medical Group and they recently just had a name change so we are Providence now.

What life is like for us?

We are a Family med, Internal med and Pediatric clinic and just our 65 and over patient population is over 7,000 alone, that is without the kids and people under 65 whom we have a lot of. I wouldn't even know the exact number of patients because it is always changing. Right now it's just us and Open Door/ Mad River which I think are one entity. We have 19 providers, and ideally we should have 19 medical assistants, one for each provider but we have not been fully staffed for quite some time. What is life like for us? It is more stressful simply because of staffing shortage due to fear. Fear is our biggest obstacle right now, we are trying to support our patients both mentally and physically. Over this last year we have lost significant amount of staffing due to fear and I have had to deal with break downs at work, increase in depression, fear and anxiety, overall mental health of our staff has been hard. I've had a lot of one on one conversations to try to help overcome this as well as doing online counseling sessions, a lot of hand holding and a lot of one on one support.

What would you want people in the future to know about what life is like for us now?

I think they need to know how superior our staff has been and in their hanging in there, helping patients with the patient's fear, patient's anxiety on top of all their regular duties of helping patients. They have done a fabulous job.

What has been the most challenging about this time?

I think everybody and everywhere things have been difficult. The biggest challenge has been the loss of staff and how hard it is to get staff. Having fewer patients in the office has been hard because we have been used to seeing and knowing our patients. The other challenge has been zoom and trying to teach out patients how to use it. Some of our patients are elder and have had a hard time learning how to access it which is just another facet that we have had to start doing- teaching patients how to zoom in order to suit their medical needs.

What do you miss about your life before Covid-19?

I miss how patients were in the office, how we were all happier and were able to better care for our patients. It seems like this has brought on so many new problems on top of the regular health conditions. Mental health has really taken a big hit through this all. I miss how times were simpler and we were able to concentrate on our patient's physical health and put our efforts into that. Now we are split even thinner trying to address it all.

Are there specific places or things in your personal life or on your job that you miss?

I miss the more carefree happier times. Times with less anxiety, when fear was gone and there was an easier pace of practice. It was like one day we had a meeting about it and then next we were expected to start testing and just make it happen with public health. Two days later we were seeing and testing up to 40 patients a day and it was just me, one nurse and one MA. We had to call the patients, make kits, figure out how to create pui's , requisitions and then twice a day we all had to gown up- create an organized system to get patients in and out in a safe manner.

How did you do that?

We labeled parking spots 1-20, looked for the color and make of cars and then had to adjust how things were being done as we learned. Next thing we were working with public health and trying to figure out how to notify people about safety and their exposure. All this on top of our regular duties! And what I was most proud of was that we never once mixed things up, we would check things 2 and 3 times just to make sure because we had the fear of God in us if we were to mess up. I stayed awake for countless nights worrying and thinking about how we could keep our patients safe, our staff safe and myself safe. It was very stressful.

Essential is a word we are hearing a lot right now. What does essential mean to you, who is essential and what are we learning about what is essential?

Essential means we can't do without them. Hmmm, what and who are essential? Staffing is essential, proper equipment is essential. We had to brainstorm over night and figure out how to make due with the equipment we had, with NO guidance. Two of our doctors started out and it quickly turned to only one of our Doctors who stuck it out- they were essential. Food, supplies, home supplies, sanitation, paper products and gas- those are the things I think are essential.

What is covid-19 making possible that never existed before? What good do you see coming out of this moment and how can we re-frame this moment as an opportunity?

Masks and sanitation being used in ways that have not existed are showing that they can really stop viruses, when used properly. By paying attention to social distancing and wearing masks we have had virtually No flu this year but not everybody will follow it and there is push back. This could be an opportunity but I worry that we won't learn anything from this. We live in a dirty world and we don't all believe in the same things and everybody should be able to make their own choices but they also need to follow guidelines and it is hard to convince someone if they don't believe. I think the biggest opportunity is for us to recognize Science and sanitation and what they can do for us.

What is it you want to remember about this time? What have you learned?

I want people to step up! I want them to take care of themselves and their community. I also want people to realize how over night life can change and everyday living in our world can STOP. We need to reassess what we do and how we do it. I want people to realize that liberties can be taken away when

things like this occur and instead of fighting it become part of the solution, make things better by caring about our community and one another.

After this pandemic ends, will things go back to the way they were? What kinds of change would you like to see and how will you contribute to rebuilding the world? What will you do differently?

I think that slowly things will get back to somewhat what we thought normal was. I don't believe it will ever get back to it completely out of fear. Just like the flu. When the flu first came out everyone was afraid and then vaccines came and slowly people were able to go back to living without the fear. But if we don't do what we have to do now we are going to continue to have that fear and anxiety in our society. We may get back to some sense of normal just in time for something else to happen. I hope I don't see another one of these situations in my lifetime. It reminds me of when the Flu first hit, that was the last big health crisis and I worked in Internal Med at that time. It was a scary time and every year I am always scared and I hate it. Thankfully people have been able to get vaccines but this time it is even scarier. I think that TV, internet and just so much information all over the world has really made it so scary. There is too much information and sometimes that can make things worse. Just too many opinions and bickering back and forth making people wonder what is true, what is not true and so many different sources. I went by where we worked and all the information we had accessible to us but others were forced to rely on world news and depending on what you were watching that could change what you knew. I think everyone needs to continue to educate themselves and to be aware.

I was supposed to retire last April, but then this hit and then this year it is still here. I couldn't imagine leaving, how depressing and isolated I would have been. This place is my life, my family. I have been here for over 41 years I couldn't just walk away. Everybody kept telling me "do it now!" and I felt like I couldn't. I can't leave the office because I have a responsibility to be there.

Things are changing here too though. We are now a corporation, it is a business more than it ever was before. Things have just changed so much! Everything is becoming so corporate. I would hope to see things change and not become so business driven. I worry about my health insurance and the premiums. Things like this make having a secondary insurance a necessity and at an additional \$700 a month I don't know how I will do it. Mentally I am just trying to hang in there. I will continue to contribute by doing my job, working hard and doing everything I can to help others, it's how I was raised and how I have always tried to work and will continue to work.