

Red Cooler Bag


Dressed in full personal protective equipment (PPE) including N95 masks, surgical masks over the N95, face shields, scrubs, double gloves, gowns, and special shoes (that I leave in my garage), we walked past a long line of people waiting to vote and into the senior housing building. I am a house call doctor in Boston and see older adults in their homes and apartments. Since March, getting dressed in full PPE out of the back of my mini-van has become the new normal. I have a system—fold down the third row of seats in my Toyota Sienna and there are two large bins. One bin marked dirty and one bin marked clean. I have Tupperware for my N95 so that it can be reused. We carry all of our equipment (stethoscope, blood pressure cuff, pulse oximeter) in a toolbox that can be easily wiped down with bleach wipes. That day I also put over my shoulder a red cooler bag with the biohazard label on the outside. This cooler bag contained the influenza vaccine.

I had two medical students from Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) with me dressed in full PPE. All students at BUSM are required to spend a month learning about the principles of geriatrics prior to graduation. We get tested for the SARS-CoV-2 virus weekly through the medical school. As I prepared the students for the staves, we approached the building. On this day, the senior building was also a polling place and hence the line out the door. We walked the line of voters and kept our distance. Several people said “thank you for what you do.” I smiled and tried to make eye contact through the protective gear. I could not tell if they thought we were there to inspect the polling place, worried that someone in the building had died or thought we were there to do testing for the SARS-CoV-2 virus. We got to the front of the line by the elevator and one of the poll workers looked at us and said, “We are all just doing our jobs.” She was herself a senior citizen also wearing a mask and face shield and gloves while safely directing voters to where they needed to go.

We were not there because someone died. We were not there to do SARS-CoV-2 virus testing. We were there to check in on patients and give them the influenza vaccine. We were there to make sure patients had the medications, food, and supplies they needed. We were there to provide hope and make the isolation a little more tolerable.

We have driven to the homes of almost 500 home bound patients in our practice and offered the influenza vaccine. I did not do this alone—our team at Boston Medical Center is made of up six doctors, two nurse practitioners, six nurse care managers, a patient care coordinator, and three administrative support representatives. My great-grandmother died during the influenza pandemic back in 1918. It is my job to protect someone else's great grandmother.

Five days later, I put up the back seats of my mini-van and loaded my three daughters into the car for soccer games. As I watched alone from the sidelines, I heard people begin to cheer. I thought someone had scored a goal but then noticed everyone looking at their phones. My phone buzzed. The Presidential election had been called. I am hopeful that soon my red cooler bag will contain the vaccine for the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

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