

Where's the silver lining? How 8 spine surgeons altered their personal, professional lives during the pandemic

Alan Condon - Wednesday, September 9th, 2020 [Print](#) | [Email](#)

Eight spine surgeons and one physical medicine and rehabilitation specialist discuss how they balanced their personal and professional lives during the pandemic and how they're faring in their new routines.

Ask Spine Surgeons is a weekly series of questions posed to spine surgeons around the country about clinical, business and policy issues affecting spine care. We invite all spine surgeon and specialist responses.

Next week's question: What is the next big health IT innovation you expect to see?

Please send responses to Alan Condon at acondon@beckershealthcare.com by 5 p.m. CDT Wednesday, Sept. 16.

Note: The following responses were lightly edited for style and clarity.

Question: How have you balanced your professional and personal life during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Colin Haines, MD. Virginia Spine Institute (Reston): Like many spine surgeons, I have recently worked more hours yet felt less productive. The delicate balancing act of helping patients navigate their spinal conditions in the context of COVID-19 has been challenging. I have also felt the pressure of needing to help support a large number of employees in my practice as well as those indirectly tied to me in the hospital. Just as important, my wife and two daughters' mental and physical health during quarantine is always on my mind. To try to juggle all sides, I have worked hard to accomplish goals that were on the sidelines during more busy clinical times, such as research projects, implant designs and practice reorganization. For my family, since my operative hours decreased, I have had more flexibility to teach schoolwork, cook breakfasts and be at home. While it's been a challenge, being more flexible in my working hours has allowed me to be productive and happy during these hard times.

Issada Thongtrangan, MD. Microspine (Phoenix): Creating a new routine and schedule isn't easy, but it is essential during the pandemic. Routines and schedules help us feel a sense of control in our lives. When our work routines are significantly altered, we can feel like we don't know where to begin or how to be productive during the workday. Creating a new schedule can be beneficial to regain that sense of control and having a respectful boundary between working hours and family hours. My family and I learned new skills during this pandemic. For example, I learned how to cook simple Italian foods virtually. There is something positive in every negative situation.

Jeremy Smith, MD. Hoag Orthopedic Institute (Irvine, Calif.): Juggling a reconstructive spine surgery practice can be complicated at times — then you toss in a global pandemic to shake up any type of normalcy you've tried to salvage and it makes for one interesting story. If our two preschool-aged kids' safety wasn't of enough concern, it became the forefront of everything we did. My wife and I are both physicians, and when COVID-19 hit, we immediately shifted our focus to the wellbeing of not only our patients, but of our loved ones. We had an extensive decontamination process, performed routine symptom checks on us and our kids, and created healthy boundaries, both physically and mentally. We made cleanliness our priority but had to remind ourselves daily that much was out of our control.

Robert Greenleaf, MD. Reconstructive Orthopedics (Sewell, N.J.): Most of the balancing issues created by the pandemic stem from having school-age children and trying to keep them meaningfully occupied with the lack of school. Early on, when offices were slowed and hospitals weren't seeing as many consults, there was more time to dedicate at home for this, but when workload picked up and the kids still needed help and attention at home, this became more of a challenge. My primary adaptation has been trying to bring more work home to do late in the evenings and weekends, such as administrative work and dictations, etc., that I normally would've tried to get done in the office.

Jeffrey Wang, MD. USC Spine Center (Los Angeles): The pandemic has allowed us to focus in many ways. Overall, we have had to make such drastic changes to our lives and society. If there is one silver lining, it is that it has given us more time to focus on our families, our patients and our home lives, both in our institutions and in our personal lives. The key focus now is on safety and overcoming this pandemic. This has resulted in minimal travel, cancellation of face-to-face meetings and virtual meetings. The lack of travel, and perhaps more importantly, the lack of a need to prepare for travel, or catch up from being away at academic meetings, has freed up much more time in my schedule. Being at home, and perhaps having more time, has allowed us to achieve a much better balance in our lives.

Richard Kim, MD. DISC Sports & Spine Center (Marina Del Rey, Calif.): The extra time off has been great. The increased time with my wife and teenage children has been a nice benefit to the economic slowdown. I've also been able to ride my bike much more, trying to get back in shape after an ankle fracture/dislocation and surgery.

Todd Lanman, MD. Lanman Spinal Neurosurgery (Beverly Hills, Calif.): My professional life has not been significantly altered, except during the lockdown phase where some patients who had been suffering with pain couldn't withstand having delayed surgeries. Since most lockdowns have been somewhat lifted, we're back to the same operative schedules we had in the past, utilizing safety measures in the office and in the hospital or surgery centers. My personal life has been altered somewhat more significantly than my professional life in the sense of social gatherings and going out to dinner. Those have been significantly impaired. In Los Angeles, we are dining outside at restaurants, but not inside. I'm having the same group of select friends, all whom have been tested and no risk or low risk, for dinner. But never more than six people at a time.

Brian Gantwerker, MD. Craniospinal Center of Los Angeles: I have gotten to know my family better than ever. We have taken drives up the coast together, gone on bike trips for the day and worked on various projects around the house. Some of my most rewarding moments have come from playing Super Mario Bros Wii with my son. Becoming more involved in his appreciation of books and Transformers has been a highlight. I have also taken up cycling in a more avid fashion and learned to not find things to do at work that can be done the next day. I have also stopped taking work home to do at night and planned my surgeries so I can be home sooner. If there is any silver lining to the pandemic, it has been to be more present and around for my family.

Sheena Bhuva, MD. Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation Specialist at Texas Back Institute (Plano): At the beginning of the pandemic there was a lot of initial work to get our telemedicine system started, which added increased stress. However, patient volume was significantly down early in the pandemic, which allowed more time to be spent with family and on personal wellbeing. Once restrictions on elective procedures were eased, I became significantly busier with in-person procedures and continued telemedicine visits. My patient volume is higher now than this time last year. Recently, I took a week off from work. It is important for us as physicians to know when we are becoming mentally fatigued so that we can take time off to recharge to make sure we are giving our best selves to our patients.

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