

Dear Faculty, Staff, Fellows, Residents and Students,

It seems like our usual very long days and nights have become even longer, and it has become hard to remember what day it is or how long we have been in this strange new way of living. Nothing is the same. Many of us are deeply engaged in the fight against this new virus. Others have the frustration of knowing that important research has been slowed down. And when it is time to go home, it is to a “shelter in place.”

But one constant remains and it is you and your dedication to our purpose, to our patients and their families, and to our community. It is the most extraordinary thing to watch all of you, our faculty, staff, and students, harness your ingenuity and drive to meet this enormous challenge. And it is that same ingenuity and drive that will lead us through even greater challenges over the coming weeks. How do we know this to be true? Every day we see new ways that many of you have extended beyond the usual and volunteered to help on the front lines or behind the scenes.

Last week we sent a survey to faculty asking about their willingness to take on new clinical roles in the upcoming weeks. The response was breathtaking, with more than 700 faculty members willing to step outside their regular areas of practice to help where they are most needed. And this week even more members of the faculty have stepped up, volunteering to potentially cover different units in the hospital, ambulatory clinics and/or the emergency department when needed. We have faculty and staff at greater risk because of age or pre-existing conditions who have happily taken on roles behind the scenes, such as running triage in the Incident Command Center, answering the phones in Occupational Health, or writing protocols for prioritization of care during the crisis. What is so astonishing is how so many of you are willing to go back to what you learned in medical school or early in your training to re-deploy yourself for what will be needed.

Nowhere is this spirit of dedication more moving than among the Washington University medical students. Life has changed drastically for our students, who just a short time ago were looking forward to various milestones, including graduation and the beginning of clinical rotations. Faced with the changes to our curriculum necessitated by these new circumstances, several of our medical students approached the education deans and asked, “What can we do?”

Supported by our educational leadership, they formed a group called the Washington University Medical Coronavirus Response Team and set out to answer their own question. In the scant time since the group’s formation, they and other students on the Medical Campus have produced over 1,600 face shields and are working on prototyping and producing even more. They have organized child care so that more of our front-line health-care providers can be available for work.

Students are also reaching out beyond the Medical Campus to offer assistance where it is needed. Some are working with the overburdened St. Louis County Health Department in its contact tracing efforts. Others have been compiling literature reviews of COVID-19 research relevant to clinical practice and making them accessible to physicians across the country. Our students are reaching out to non-English speaking members of the St. Louis community to make sure that they have the information they need to stay healthy, help flatten the curve, and get help if they need it. And they are partnering with the nonprofit STL Food Angels to offer non-contact grocery delivery to area residents who have tested positive or are in high-risk groups. How lucky we are to have these students as a part of our team, our family.

Yes, it is you who are the constant. It is you showing the rest of the world what we are here to do, what we have chosen to do, what our purpose is. We want to assure you again as we write today that all of your leaders, the department heads, institute directors and BJC executives recognize your bravery, and each day we are probing for every possible way to help you carry out this purpose most effectively and most safely.

In her analysis of how several legendary figures navigated moments of crisis, Harvard historian Nancy Koehn describes a shared character trait, of being “touched by the fire of working for the public interest,” putting aside their personal plans and ambitions in order to serve others and work for the greater good. We are in just such a moment. Whatever long term plans we had are put on hold, and we are being called to use our gifts and our training to serve others right here and now, sometimes at great cost. As everyone around us turns inward and relies on safe distances, we rush out to lay hands on those who need our help. There will be more of those who need us in the coming days and weeks and, because of all of you, we will respond. A strange privilege in a strange moment.

Sincerely,

David H. Perlmutter, MD  
Executive Vice Chancellor for Medical Affairs and Dean

Andrew D. Martin, PhD  
Chancellor