Training in Neurology: Flexibility and adaptability of a neurology training program at the epicenter of COVID-19

Shashank Agarwal, MD,* Sakinah Sabadia, MD,* Nada Abou-Fayssal, MD, Arielle Kurzweil, MD, Laura J. Balcer, MD, MSCE, Steven L. Galetta, MD

* These authors contributed equally to this work.

From the Departments of Neurology (S.A., S.S., N.A-F., A.K., L.J.B., S.L.G.), Population Health (L.J.B.) and Ophthalmology (L.J.B., S.L.G.), New York University (NYU) Grossman School of Medicine, New York, NY, USA.

Corresponding author: Arielle Kurzweil, MD
arielle.kurzweil@nyulangone.org

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L. Balcer reports no relevant disclosures.
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Abstract

Objective: To outline changes made to a neurology residency program in response to COVID-19.

Methods: In early March 2020, the first cases of COVID-19 were announced in the US. New York City quickly became the epicenter of a global pandemic, and our training program needed to rapidly adapt to the increasing number of inpatient cases while being mindful of protecting providers and continuing education. Many of these changes unfolded over days, including removing residents from outpatient services, minimizing the number of residents on inpatient services, deploying residents to medicine services and medical ICUs, converting continuity clinic patient visits to virtual options, transforming didactics to online platforms only, and maintaining connectedness in an era of social distancing. We have been able to accomplish this through daily virtual meetings among leadership, faculty, and residents.

Results: Over time, our program has successfully rolled out initiatives to service the growing number of COVID related inpatients while maintaining neurologic care for those in need and continuing our neurologic education curriculum.

Conclusions: It has been necessary and feasible for our residency training program to undergo rapid structural changes to adapt to a medical crisis. The key ingredients in doing this successfully have been flexibility and teamwork. We suspect that many of the implemented changes will persist long after COVID-19 crisis has passed, and will change the approach to neurologic and medical training.

Introduction

The first cases of Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) were reported in December 2019, originating in Wuhan, China.\(^1\) The disease spread rapidly worldwide becoming a public health emergency of international concern and the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020.\(^2\) As of April 1, 2020, there were 926,095 cases worldwide. USA reported the highest number of cases with 209,071 affected patients and 4633 deaths, with New York City (NYC) accounting for 83,948...
cases and 1941 deaths.3

Physicians have always been at the forefront of deadly outbreaks worldwide, and, as a result, have been potentially infected by the same diseases as their patients. Residents provide the bulk of direct patient contact within teaching hospitals and are therefore at risk of exposure to communicable disease. This pandemic has drastically changed the lives and the outlook of residents in an incredibly short period of time.

In this article, we describe modifications made to various aspects of neurology residency training program at New York University (NYU) Grossman School of Medicine’s teaching hospitals during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our training sites include NYU Langone Health Manhattan, Bellevue Hospital, Manhattan Veterans’ Affairs (VA) Medical Center and NYU Langone Health – Brooklyn. Changes have been made to minimize work disruptions while respecting public health guidance. Our goals have been to continue resident education, promote safe patient care and to best manage the utilization of available resources, including personnel and personal protective equipment (PPE). A summary of these changes can be found in Table 1.

### Inpatient and Consult Services

The inpatient and consult teams have been scaled down and limited to schedules of one attending neurologist and one resident for each service. The remainder of individuals on the team (residents and advanced practice providers [APPs]) have been placed on “jeopardy” call or deployed to intensive care units, medical units or the emergency department. When caring for patients with COVID-19, only one member of the neurology inpatient team (usually the attending physician) will see the patient directly in order to minimize exposure and to preserve PPE. Residents directly evaluate COVID-19 patients when the attending physicians are not present, such as during overnight calls or when patients are unstable. All residents are available to provide assistance. Residents on work exemptions due to chronic immunosuppression or pregnancy have been enlisted to help remotely and supervise daily sign off, help with
pre-rounds, participate remotely in daily rounds, help with entering orders, and take charge of the daily calls to family members. Procedures, such as lumbar punctures on confirmed or suspected COVID-19 patients, are performed by attending physicians (when available) to avoid exposure to multiple personnel. Residents are expected to perform these procedures when on overnight calls or during the day if a procedure is needed urgently and the attending physician is unavailable. Neurology consult requests for COVID-19 patients are reviewed by the neurology attending physicians to ensure medical necessity for such consults. One person from each team obtains a focused history and examination; follow-up visits with direct contact are performed when needed. A method of interacting with patients virtually in the hospital called Jabber is newly available. A provider downloads the Jabber app on their mobile device, and is able to use this to securely dial into a patient’s room through MyWall, an interface on every patient’s hospital room TV. Anecdotally this has been difficult to utilize for many of the inpatient neurology consults where exam is crucial, or the reason for consultation is altered mental status. Nonetheless, this is a new technology being introduced now and it may have more utility for different types of consults. The technology allows an attending or resident to be remotely involved with an inpatient consult and could enhance supervision for the trainee. Furthermore, a qualified assistant like a nurse could be available to aid with the encounter.

**Epilepsy Monitoring Unit (EMU)**

In accordance with the City of New York Office of the Mayor Emergency Executive Order, all elective procedures and hospital admissions have been cancelled in light of the coronavirus pandemic. These have included elective admissions to the epilepsy monitoring service for video encephalography (vEEG). EMU census across all affiliated hospitals is currently comprised of patients admitted directly from the emergency department. Coverage of these patients is currently maintained by a shared general neurology resident or APP. Designated EMU residents have been deployed to cover medical or neurology services.

**Stroke Emergencies (Stroke Codes) and Consults**

The stroke team that usually responds to stroke codes includes a resident, an APP, and, occasionally, a fellow. The response team is now reduced to one resident; the remainder of the team has been deployed.
elsewhere in intensive care units, medical inpatient units and the emergency department. All patients presenting as stroke codes in the emergency departments across NYU-affiliated sites are currently being screened for COVID-19. PPE used for high risk patients is used in accordance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines and includes an N95 mask covered with a surgical mask, a face shield, a gown and gloves. The National Institutes of Health Stroke Scale (NIHSS) is being performed after initial computed tomography (CT) of the brain in order to preserve PPE. For stroke codes in the COVID-19 unit, the resident verifies with the team and any collateral source the timing of neurological deficits and reviews the chart for medical history and hospital course before discussing with the stroke attending physician; it is then determined whether a neurological examination is warranted. Based on these discussions, if a determination is made for an emergent neurological examination, then the resident utilizes appropriate PPE while examining the patient before imaging is obtained.

**Neuro-Intensive Care Unit (ICU)**

Two of the four NYU Langone Health hospital sites currently have Neuro-ICUs where critically ill patients with primary neurologic diagnoses are cared for by neuro-intensivists. The teams on these units include a resident, an APP, and a neuro-ICU attending physician. The Neuro-ICU team is now made up of solely a resident and attending, and the daily rounding protocol is similar to those of the inpatient stroke and general neurology teams. Since many of the neuro-ICU patients require vEEG monitoring, patients with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 are monitored using Ceribell – Rapid Response EEG. Ceribell is a 10-electode headband that is quick and easy to place; it can be used to assess for non-convulsive status epilepticus. This placement is currently done by the EEG technicians (during the daytime) or the resident (during night shifts). The use of Ceribell instead of vEEG units limits exposure of the EEG technicians who would otherwise need to be in close contact with the patient for extended periods of time.
Resident Continuity Clinics

Throughout the three years of neurology residency training, residents follow patients in their continuity clinics under the supervision of attending faculty. Patients seen in these clinics include those recently discharged from the hospital and referrals from the emergency department, primary care or other subspecialty clinics. Residents’ clinics have transitioned to a telemedicine model in order to limit close contact between patients and providers and to promote physical distancing while facilitating access to neurological care during the COVID-19 pandemic. Patients are called prior to their visits by support staff, and consented to switch their visit to a virtual health visit; these have included video visits (for those patients with video capabilities on a smart phone or iPad) or phone visits for those without video capabilities. At the time of the call, the support staff review the logistics of the upcoming virtual visit with the patient. Some patients have opted to reschedule their routine visits given a preference for in-person communication. Virtual visits are conducted by residents and other providers from home using remote access to the medical record. For telephone visits, a resident makes the call and provides an assessment and plan. If they have a second phone line, they place the patient on hold and call the supervising attending physician at an offsite location to review the case before finalizing with the patient. If there is no second phone line, the resident hangs up with the patient, phones the attending physician to review the case, then calls the patient back with final recommendations. Documentation is placed remotely in the chart by the residents and then an attestation is made by the supervising attending. In the case of video visits, two providers can sign in simultaneously to a patient’s video visit via Haiku or Canto on EPIC. This allows for direct attending supervision. Alternatively, Haiku to Haiku is a new feature that allows clinician-to-clinician video communication; this will allow a resident to call in an attending for consultation if needed and can be done in a mobile fashion.
The ability for two providers to join the same virtual visit will enable virtual Clinical Skills Evaluations (CSEs) to occur, which are now being accepted by the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology (ABPN) as part of credentialing requirements to sit for an ABPN Initial Certification exam. We are preparing for CSEs to begin in the upcoming weeks. A tip sheet created for residents and faculty to navigate virtual CSEs can be found in Table 2. The video visit exam has been reviewed extensively by a committee of attendings; major limitations at this time include deep tendon reflexes and the fundoscopic exam.

Ambulatory Rotations

During these rotation blocks, residents typically rotate through either an ambulatory urgent care rotation or a subspecialty clinic rotation (SSC) with faculty group practice (FGP) physicians in specialties including neuro-oncology, neuro-ophthalmology, vascular neurology, epilepsy, neuroimmunology/multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, neuromuscular medicine, headache/Botox clinic, neuro-rehabilitation, sleep medicine, movement disorders, neuro-otology, dysautonomia clinic and behavioral neurology. These rotations have been placed on hold for during the current pandemic as visits are being conducted via telehealth services among our FGP physicians. Residents on the ambulatory care rotations are either on “jeopardy” while working at home on scholarly activities, providing services for NYU COVID-19 telephone hotlines, or volunteering on COVID-19 inpatient medical units.

Virtual Learning

We have quickly learned what can be accomplished remotely and what learning topics require in-person attendance. Our residency program was already utilizing online platforms for morning and afternoon didactic sessions to enable resident participation from various NYU hospital sites. With the travel restrictions affecting guest speakers from around the country, and in an effort to keep physical distancing, weekly grand rounds lectures are now solely conducted via Webex. All other educational activities, such as the Patient-Oriented Research Curriculum (PORC), journal club, bi-weekly continuum presentations, and
case-based morning reports and professors’ rounds, which previously were available via our video-conferencing bridge between hospitals have now been converted to an online-only platform. The grand rounds lectures are recorded for future viewing. Virtual learning has made lectures and didactic activities more readily available, leading to increases in attendance among residents, fellows and faculty.

**Scholarly Activities**

In accordance with CDC recommendations, American Academy of Neurology (AAN) cancelled its 2020 Annual Meeting for the first time in its 72-year history. Although a prudent decision, this was of course a disappointment for residents. Many had worked hard on abstracts and presentations and were looking forward to travelling to Toronto to present their research to neurologists from around the world. In order to offset the cancellation of various national meetings, the Annual NYU Neurology Research Symposium, usually held in May, will be postponed until the fall of 2020. This platform allows medical students, residents and fellows to present their scholarly work. Residents who were previously scheduled for ambulatory rotations and electives and are now in a “jeopardy” pool are encouraged to engage in scholarly work related to our evolving understanding, adaptations, and potential neurological complications of COVID-19.

**Global Neurology Elective**

NYU has a robust Global Health in Neurology program in collaboration with hospitals in Uganda and Tanzania. Each year, once in the fall and once in spring, two NYU neurology residents travel with a mentor to learn neurology in resource limited settings. Residents who had previously secured this rotation have needed to reschedule or cancel their plans due to travel restrictions. While such a rotation requires extensive planning, paperwork, and funding, affected residents have risen to the occasion of the cancelation graciously by providing additional assistance on inpatient units and with the writing of manuscripts related to the COVID-19 response/experience.
Fellowship and Faculty Position Interviews

As CDC travel restrictions have tightened, programs have canceled in-person fellowship interviews and have been conducting them using virtual web-based platforms. The academic medicine community is not alone in facing this challenge. LinkedIn, Google, Facebook, and Amazon have all halted on-site job interviews indefinitely, and are utilizing alternative resources for conducting virtual meetings. Various sub-specialty fellowship interviews at NYU have been conducted via Webex. The interview sessions have included Webex-based didactic presentations by the fellowship program directors, followed by applicant interviews with faculty. Many of our current residents have been affected by the travel ban policy and have interviewed for fellowships on virtual platforms at institutions around the country. While virtual interviews are not ideal for applicants (they are unable to tour the academic or hospital facilities, for example), they do allow for interactions with faculty, staff and current fellows.

Virtual Neurology Match

On March 20, 2020, medical students around the country learned of their residency program match results. This year’s match was held virtually, and the NYU neurology residency program was excited to welcome a new incoming class of residents. Each matched student was contacted by program leadership on the phone to congratulate and welcome them; students also enjoyed virtual celebrations with their families and friends.

Resident Wellness

The COVID-19 pandemic has created physical and emotional strain on trainees. Important elements of this have included uncertainty in caring for patients with a new medical disease, fear of infection and transmission to others, and necessity for working in unfamiliar areas of the hospitals; this has all occurred while needing to keep physical distance. Virtual platforms have been helpful in maintaining connections, engaging in regular check-ins, and continuing scholarly and didactic learning. Resident forum, which was previously held twice monthly to provide an opportunity for program leadership to meet with residents informally and to discuss any residency related topics, has now become a twice weekly occurrence and is
held virtually. We have found that given the constant flux and flow of new information surrounding this pandemic, and certainly the email fatigue that comes with it, these frequent and regular virtual meetings have been essential in conveying necessary and up-to-date information. Our chairman sends a nightly email with pertinent institutional updates, though also infuses each email with some much needed inspiration in the form of a cartoon, song, quote, or poem. We have arranged for virtual support groups led by psychiatry and neurology-psychiatry double-boarded colleagues. A common moto in our program has been “food is love,” and we have been maintaining nourishment when possible in the form of individually wrapped items. Virtual happy hours via online platforms have been enjoyable and will continue throughout this time when we all need to stay connected with our colleagues.

**Departmental Operations**

Adjustments to departmental operations have been intertwined with changes made in our training programs. The faculty group practices (FGP) have converted in-person visits to virtual health visits. Where residents once rotated in ambulatory settings such as urgent care, subspecialty clinics, and electives, some are now being asked to work on scholarly activities at home to stay healthy while waiting to relieve neurology colleagues who may become on inpatient services or assist in the medical units with COVID-19 patients. There are two faculty members assigned per day to be available to see urgent virtual health visits in our offices in addition to routine subspecialty and general neurology virtual visits. At present, we are doing approximately 200 neurology virtual (video) visits a day. While attending physicians once led large teams of learners (medical students, residents, fellows, APPs) on inpatient services, we are operating on a scaled-down model where teams are comprised of one resident and one attending physician. For weekend coverage, one attending physician typically covers all calls for both the hospital and for our neurology FGP patients. Currently, each member of the faculty covers his/her own practice on the weekends and
nights in an effort to relieve the inpatient attending physician from answering phone calls while donning and doffing PPE to see COVID-19 patients.

In addition to serving the role of primary neurology resident, many neurology residents have already been deployed to medicine units, medicine ICUs, and the emergency department during their elective time given the surge of patients with COVID-19. At this time, approximately 90% of our hospital populations are comprised of patients with COVID-19. In order to maintain safety and prevent infection transmission, all residents were required to complete online training video modules of correct practices of donning and doffing PPE. Additional, in-person training has been conducted for services thought to have the highest risk of exposure to COVID-19. To optimally prepare the neurology residents, two sessions were scheduled with a nurse from the Infection Prevention and Control Department and streamed virtually to allow residents and faculty to tune in from offsite and to ask questions.

Conclusions
The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sudden disruption of life as we know it. Residency training programs are no exception, and have needed to remain flexible to adapt to this rapidly changing and ever-evolving situation. The structure of our various rotations, staffing, ambulatory care, and even the type of care we are providing has drastically changed. Policies put in place one day may change by the next. The role of residents during this time has been considered and has also undergone adjustments. As the numbers of COVID-19 cases have grown drastically throughout our hospitals to the hundreds, neurology residents have had increasing roles in the inpatient and emergency settings, including our medical ICUs. There is a physical need for residents to deploy to COVID-19 units; this has not only provided additional patient care and staff camaraderie but has
led to opportunities for learning and leadership. The ACGME mandates achievements in core competencies that extend well-beyond neurologic knowledge and patient care. Professionalism and systems-based learning are particularly valuable during this pandemic, and there is much skill to be built in these domains by performing on the front-lines. It has become obvious that it is necessary for residents to be deeply involved in the pandemic response on multiple levels. Our residents have shown tremendous resilience during this time and have risen to the occasion. Their eagerness to aid has been inspirational, and humanism has prevailed. And our success thus far has relied on a flexible and adaptive mindset for all aspects of a residency training program.

An important question remains unanswered: when the COVID-19 crisis has passed, what changes to our training program will persist? Certainly, we hope to revert back to a better balance of inpatient and outpatient rotations for trainees. And nothing can replace the satisfaction of discussing cases together around a table, or at the bedside. Yet teleneurology is here to stay. Pre-COVID, we had formed a committee of faculty members and residents interested in promoting teleneurology in our clinics and educational structure, and hoped this would materialize over the course of a year. Instead, circumstances forced them into existence in a matter of weeks. We speculate that we will continue to utilize teleneurology not only for patient care, but also for education. Virtual options provide the ability for an attending to supervise resident activity remotely, in both hospital and ambulatory settings. Virtual platforms have been instrumental in providing didactics and educational opportunities, as well as the ability to record lectures, and will likely persist to some extent even when in-person conferencing is allowed again. We do believe that on the other end of this crisis we will be stronger as physicians, and as a training program.
## Appendix. Authors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Contribution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shashank Agarwal, MD</td>
<td>NYU Langone Health</td>
<td>writing/editing the manuscript</td>
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<td>writing/editing the manuscript</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura J. Balcer, MD, MSCE</td>
<td>NYU Langone Health</td>
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<tr>
<td>Steven L. Galetta, MD</td>
<td>NYU Langone Health</td>
<td>writing/editing the manuscript</td>
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References

1. World Health Organization - Pneumonia of unknown cause – China (January 2020).


Table 1: Summary of adaptations made to NYU Neurology Residency during COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect of the Residency Program</th>
<th>Adaptation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient neurology services</td>
<td>Skeleton services minimizing team numbers, one team member physically rounding on patients with COVID, use of Jabber app to interact remotely with inpatients via their MyWall on the hospital room TV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilepsy Monitoring Units</td>
<td>All elective admissions canceled. Urgent admissions through the ED only.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroke codes</td>
<td>One resident responds wearing an N95 mask, a face shield, a gown, and gloves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuro-ICU</td>
<td>One resident plus one attending team, use of Ceribell (bedside EEG band) to monitor for nonconvulsive seizures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resident continuity clinics</td>
<td>All in-person appointments have been rescheduled to telephone or video visits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambulatory rotations (subspecialty clinic, urgent care, elective)</td>
<td>These rotations are on hold for now. Instead residents are providing services for COVID telephone hotlines, working on scholarly activity, act as ”jeopardy” for sick residents, or are working in the COVID medicine units and ICUs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didactics</td>
<td>Didactics including Grand Rounds, morning report, Professors’ Rounds, research curriculum, journal club and others have all been converted to an online-only platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Bimonthly resident forums are now occurring twice weekly with an online platform, a nightly update email is sent, virtual support groups are held weekly, virtual happy hours weekly, food is supplied to those in the hospitals.</td>
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<td>No.</td>
<td>Tip</td>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>On EPIC, check individual provider schedules to see who is doing video visits in their FGP practices. The following CSEs can be completed virtually outpatient: Ambulatory, Neurodegenerative, Neuromuscular, Child neurology.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Contact an attending doing virtual visits to set up a virtual CSE on any of the above topics. This should be done a few days to a week in advance. Ensure that you send the attending the blank CSE evaluation form. You will provided with a list of participating attendings for each CSE.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>For the critical illness CSE, we will try to do this inpatient if possible. Please contact one of our neuro-ICU or neurovascular faculty to arrange for a CSE to be completed on a non-COVID patient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>For outpatient virtual CSE on day of the encounter: monitor the EPIC screen with the Attending’s patient schedule – refresh intermittently to identify when patient signs into the visit – the video icon will turn green when the patient is in the virtual waiting room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Resident and attending both “enter” the video visit through Haiku or Canto.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Attending: introduce yourself and your role to patient, and that a resident will be taking the history and performing the virtual exam with you observing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Resident: introduce yourself and your role, and proceed with H&amp;P.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Once resident completes the H&amp;P, attending can notify the patient that the resident will now present impression and propose a plan, and attending will fill in with the finalized plan for the patient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>When finished, all parties end the call.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Attending is responsible for placing orders and documenting the visit.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Once complete and ready, attending should call the resident to provide verbal feedback about the encounter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Attending should then complete the CSE evaluation form, and email to the resident or directly to the program coordinator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>The resident is responsible for getting all completed CSE forms to our program coordinator.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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