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Why I No Longer Teach ATLS

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(formerly, FAAEM)

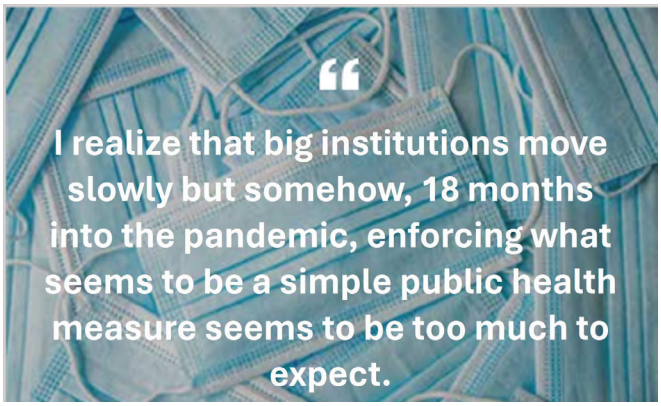
Several years into my nearly 40 years of emergency medicine practice, I took an ATLS provider, and then an ATLS instructor course. Since 1984, I had taught in over 120 courses, mostly in and around Philadelphia, but, thanks to an enthusiastic ED physician I met initially on a List-Serv, also several times in Wales, where I met a large number of enthusiastic ED and other physicians who made teaching an otherwise standard course quite interesting.

Come the pandemic, I taught my first ATLS Zoom course in March 2020 for a program where I had taught over half of all my courses, and planned to teach at several more throughout that year. Unfortunately, in June, the parent organization decided to stop all teaching programs at this facility, and most of the staff was let go.

Two of the people I had worked with, extensively, landed at another hospital where the following year they instituted a training program and were initiating their ATLS courses with an instructor course in August 2021. I was one of the three physician instructors who would supervise the course, along with an educator. I was reluctant to spend time indoors in any venue, much less one where close contact, speaking, and interacting might be necessary, but because of assurances from my friends, I agreed.

The course description said mask wearing was mandatory and described the usual Covid-19 precautions. When I arrived at the facility where the course was to be taught, I checked in on the ground floor where my temperature was checked and I was offered a paper mask to supplement my cloth mask. I then proceeded to the site where the teaching was to occur.

When I got there, I entered the room and found that the educator was not wearing a mask. I asked him to put one on but he insisted it wasn't necessary. I again asked and he refused. I saw one of my colleagues and mentioned to her that the educator was refusing to wear a mask and asked her if she wanted to walk out if he still refused. She concurred. I then approached the educator and stated that if he refused to mask, I would leave, and the course would have to be cancelled. He finally put a mask on, but incorrectly, and I advised him that if he didn't know how to wear one correctly, I would show him. He walked away and I shouted after him "You are a f***ing educator, how about if you educate yourself?" I also spoke with the administrative people to get their support but was told that they couldn't do anything as the educator was also their boss.



The course proceeded without further incident but afterwards I wrote a summary of the events to everyone at the American College of Surgeons about the event, and encouraged the course administrators at the national level to again require mask wearing.

I didn't hear anything for a month but when I did, it was to reprimand me for being a disruptive influence, rather than focusing on the serious issue of violating the local health rules, hospital requirements, and course requirements of mask wearing specifically, and providing a safe teaching environment in general.

I realize that big institutions move slowly but somehow, 18 months into the pandemic, enforcing what seems to be a simple public health measure seems to be too much to expect. Consequently, I decided that I am the dinosaur and the time has come to give up teaching since none of the courses being offered locally are Zoom based. Too bad, I enjoyed teaching.

I was a founding member of AAEM until my retirement from practice in 2015 and was the initial sponsor of what was the Joe Lex (now Educator of the Year) Award, as well as a long-time oral board instructor (25 courses), and member of the education committee.

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