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## Photojournalist-Turned-Nurse Documents Realities of COVID

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See Alan Hawes' photography from the front lines [here](#).

Before he became a nurse, Alan Hawes, RN, spent two decades as a news photographer capturing images ranging from the war in Iraq to the realities of gun violence. A good photojournalist needs to be able to predict how people are going to react to an event and then place themselves physically in the spot where the best angle is going to be.



Alan Hawes, RN

So when COVID patients began inundating the Medical University of South Carolina (MUSC), where Hawes serves in the medical intensive care unit (MICU), he wished he could capture those early dramatic moments on camera, he told *Medscape Medical News*. "I really wanted to show the emotional toll it was taking on us," Hawes said of his co-workers.

But HIPAA laws, designed to protect patient privacy, prevented him from sharing with the world what it was like working in a COVID unit.

It was a busy time in the hospital, remembers MICU nurse manager Janet Byrne, RN, who hired Hawes 5 years ago. She suddenly found herself managing a COVID floor, spending 80-hour work weeks trying to meet the demands of a pandemic, she told *Medscape Medical News*.

When Hawes first approached Byrne about bringing his camera into the ICU, she didn't realize then how beneficial it would become, not only in bringing awareness to the public but to other nurses as well.

Still, it wasn't an easy sell, Byrne explained. It wasn't that the hospital was against it, but a nurse wanting to document COVID in photos just wasn't a high priority amid a global pandemic. So it took 1½ years for the request to be approved.

### Silent Trauma on the Front Lines

Hawes took his camera into the hospital on his days off, and his photos started to circulate once news media picked up stories about him.

In addition to wanting to show the public what it was like, he wanted nurses in other healthcare facilities to see situations similar to those they were facing.

He cites his most powerful photo as one he took of his co-worker Andrea being comforted at the nurse's station after making yet another call to a family member to say that their loved one was not going to survive.

Hawes hasn't had much time to talk about his experiences with his co-workers. "I was internalizing it, and I had to," he said. There was always another shift, another critically ill patient with COVID to care for.

"That's just not something people are going to be able to see unless they're in it," Hawes said. He wanted to show those on the outside that while COVID affects patients and their families, healthcare workers aren't immune.

"Some of the stuff that really got to us was during the Delta wave when people had the opportunity to be vaccinated and yet they're still coming to us," he said.

Byrne said Hawes' photos have helped show the community what everyday life is like for healthcare professionals. "His work has emphasized the teamwork, how important safe staffing is, how important it is to have the equipment and supplies that we need."

Hawes realizes his team's experiences are just an example of what's happening at other hospitals: healthcare workers at the bedside with a dying patient, comforting family members as they hold their loved-one's hand, or breaking down after relaying the tragic news.

"I think people can just relate to that, and I think that's comforting...and I think it helps to know you're not alone."

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