

Essay Title: "The Cornerstone of Scientific Success: Unsung Frontline Heroes of the COVID-19 Pandemic"

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In the late spring of 2020, I was conversing with Justin, an employee at a popular medical center in New York City. Reflecting on the challenges and demands of healthcare brought upon by the COVID-19 pandemic, Justin confided to me, "Since the beginning of the pandemic, I've been working very hard. All day, I am back and forth between the emergency rooms, urgent care rooms, and COVID floors." Immediately, Justin's tone switched from proud to troubled: "When I go home each night, I go home to a family that is fearful of me due to the possibility that I may have contracted COVID-19 at work. Instead of my wife and children greeting me with words of encouragement and congratulations on my contribution to fighting the pandemic, they retreat from my embrace."

In those of us who do not risk daily COVID-19 exposure to the same degree, the unfortunate reality described by Justin may evoke feelings of sadness and unfairness on Justin's behalf. At the very least, we can be sympathetic. And we are, aren't we? Is it not for these brave individuals that we put signs in front of our homes which read "support our heroes"? Do we not thank these hard workers for their great sacrifice during the ongoing pandemic by showing our support via social media and other public platforms?

Shockingly, the answer to these questions for many of us is no, we might not recognize these frontline heroes. There is one striking difference between Justin and many other essential workers facing COVID-19 in healthcare facilities. Justin concluded his troubled remarks to me: "When the doctors and nurses finish their shifts and leave for the day, they get a standing ovation and round of applause from neighborhood residents and passersby. When I leave for the day, no one gives me any attention. Why? Because I am just a janitor. Like the doctors and nurses, I am essential to my institution. Yet my role in fighting the pandemic sparks no public feelings of pride. To the average individual, I am no COVID hero. To most people, I am a nobody."

The most important scientific lesson I've learned during the COVID-19 pandemic is that success in science requires input far beyond science, and we have a moral and ethical obligation to recognize this input. Proper maintenance of medical facilities is what enables medicine to be practiced and scientific research to be produced within these facilities. Busy with our own scientific pursuits, have we ever stopped to consider this idea, to appreciate the brave support staff of the medical industry? Do we notice the custodians who, like the doctors, risk their lives in the face of COVID-19 exposure by coming to work every day? Do we smile at the cleaning crew members who take out the trash and sterilize surfaces so that our medical

facilities can continue their noble work? Do we count these critical workers when we think of frontline COVID-19 heroes? And importantly, the pandemic aside, do we normally consider the hard work by these custodians significant? I think we are woefully mistaken if we do not.

Coincidentally, the COVID-19 pandemic overlapped with national outcries against injustice, and calls for equality and mutual respect. To me, this was no coincidence at all, but a signal that we should strive to be more inclusive in all areas of life, including how we as individuals evaluate qualifications for heroism in the healthcare workplace during such a dangerous pandemic. We should applaud *all* the brave employees that work hard to perpetuate healthcare.

This calling impacts my work on a daily basis. I regularly contemplate the fact that we scientists alone do not hold the key to our success. The contribution of support staff can make the difference between productivity and failure, life and death. There should be no such stigma as “just a janitor”; everyone is important, and the diversity of occupations and employee strengths is precisely what enables society to flourish. Elitism engenders a poisonous environment, while mutual respect within the workplace advances the entire workplace. Currently, I try to set a positive example in my workplace by exhibiting an appreciative and respectful attitude toward everyone I encounter.

Beyond my own ruminations, the lesson at hand begs an important question. To what extent and in what ways should the scientific community acknowledge its support staff? At the very least, we academics must extend our efforts of promoting equality, inclusion, and kindness among our peers to those who are not our peers, who do not hold the same level job or make the same salary as we do. In a future, more influential role in academia, I would love to collaborate with equality and inclusion committees to pursue this question and ensure proper recognition for unsung heroes like Justin.