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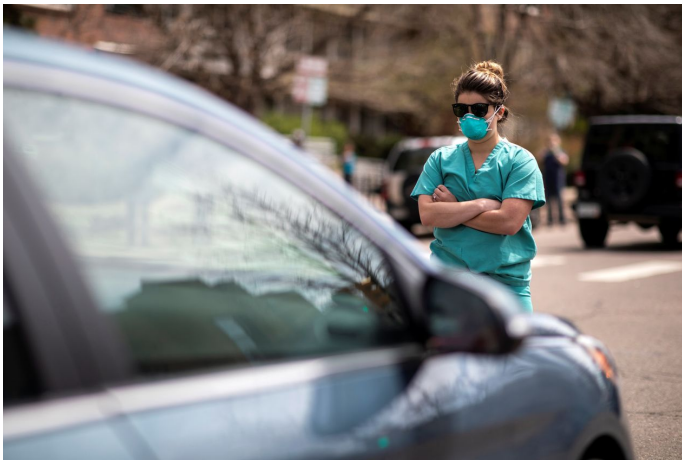
OPINION | COMMENTARY

Why Are Counterprotesters in Scrubs?

When I was training as a doctor, you'd change clothes at the hospital to avoid spreading infection.

By Michael Segal

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A health-care worker at a counterprotest in Denver, April 19.

PHOTO: ALYSON MCCLARAN/REUTERS

You've probably seen those photos of health-care workers counterprotesting in favor of coronavirus lockdowns. In one case a physician's assistant stands in a Denver crosswalk, blocking protesters' cars. Your reaction may vary depending on what you think of the lockdown. I side more with the counterprotesters because some of the protesters' demands, such as ending all restrictions on large crowds, are dangerous. But I also wonder: Why are the counterprotesters wearing scrubs?

When I was being trained as a doctor in the 1980s, we were forbidden to leave the hospital in scrubs. You changed clothes in the hospital to avoid bringing infections out on scrubs or bringing dirt in. At some point that changed, and health-care workers started removing scrubs at home and washing them there.

Is that wise during a pandemic? In recent weeks, several people I know have gotten sick—possibly from coronavirus—after being exposed to health-care workers. One instance

occurred two weeks before social-distancing recommendations; the other involved a gathering at a residence to which a nurse came from work in scrubs. (The people I know have recovered, and until antibody testing becomes reliable and easily available, we won't know whether these were coronavirus infections.)

In "Of the Epidemics," Hippocrates wrote that physicians should "have two special objects in view with regard to disease, namely, to do good or to do no harm." Clinicians have done enormous good in recent weeks and have much moral authority by virtue of the risks they're taking and the terrible suffering they witness simply in doing their jobs. Some are even going out of their way to minimize harm by sleeping in hotels or their basements to avoid contaminating others. Yet some are taking unnecessary risks that may do harm.

The counterprotesters in scrubs are making an important point. But they'd have more credibility if they also set a good example by not wearing scrubs in public.

Dr. Segal is a neurologist and neuroscientist.

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