treated for COVID-19 in the ICU told Pat-
terson they wanted others to see that the
virus’s effects are real and enormous; they
hope their stories encourage people to be
vaccinated. “They want to share what it feels
like to be alone in a hospital fearing for your
life,” says Patterson.
Patterson started her project after a par-
ticularly challenging shift in the emergency
department. She set out to capture the day-
to-day pressure on physicians, hoping to
find motivation in her colleagues’ resolve.
It worked. Patterson says that, along with
heartbreak, she’s been witness to immense
love and resilience. “The moments of kind-
ness and compassion I’ve seen inspire me
to keep going,” says Patterson. “Otherwise,
the trauma and the tragedy would be over-
whelming.”

CHRISTINA FRANGOU

COVID-19 transformed hospitals. There are no more families or friends at bed-
sides, just waves of patients—sick, scared and struggling to breathe. With the rest of the
world locked out, the relationship between patients and health care workers has inten-
sified. Critically ill patients with COVID-19 often remain hospitalized for weeks. Doctors,
nurses and other staff perform intricate, high-
stress medical acts, like intubations. They also
carry out intimate acts like washing faces and
holding up iPads so a wife can ask her hus-
bond to wake up.

Heather Patterson is a Calgary emer-
gency physician and photographer. On her
days off, she returns to the hospital to ask
patients’ permission to take photographs
throughout their illness. During the third
wave of the pandemic, many people being

 Alone and afraid

A Calgary physician captures COVID-19 in the ICU: trauma, heartbreak and immense love and resilience

The moment of quiet after a patient has been turned onto his back, his nurse has just left the room, after applying balm to his lips and dimming the lights.
With COVID-19, health-care teams have a short window of time during which patients can be safely intubated. Physicians and respiratory therapists sweat under their layers of PPE, making their hands slippery and adding to the challenge: “The degree of intensity and focus during an intubation is quite heightened.”

An ICU nurse stands in a doorway watching her patient. He was intubated the following day. The patient survived and later asked Patterson to thank the nurse. “He was always aware that she was taking care of him.”

On his 19th day in hospital, a man longs for home. “He really missed his family and just wanted to go home. That was one of his motivating factors for working so hard to get into that chair.”
(above) A woman stands up, briefly, for the first time after 11 days on a ventilator: “It was just a profound amount of effort. For me, it was a reflection of the significant impact COVID can have”. (below) Needles, swabs and medications, along with salted nuts and candy, cover the bedside table of a patient hospitalized with COVID-19.

Every afternoon, this man’s wife, their children and spouses, and granddaughter would call by video. Though he was intubated and sedated, the mood of their one-sided conversations was always light. “[But] it would always end with his wife saying, ‘Please wake up. It’s been too long.’”