

THE HOT SEAT SERIES

Fast Takes With Today's Skilled Nursing Leaders

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Dr. Ben Zaniello

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Dr. Ben Zaniello is Chief Medical Office of PointClickCare. In his role as a technology leader with a medical background, Dr. Zaniello offers a unique perspective on the skilled nursing industry. He's also learned some interesting on-the-job experience during his tenure, which he shares in this Hot Seat interview. Read on to learn more about Dr. Zaniello's take on the industry as well as some personal details from his inspirations to why he thinks it is always important to have a good mentor.

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
Are you a morning person or night owl?

Dr. Ben Zaniello: Is it ok that I'm optimized for the afternoons?

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
If you could have one superpower, what would it be and why?

Dr. Zaniello: I never understand why people would not automatically say "Flight." What other superpower matters?!

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
It's 7 am on a Saturday. Where are you right now?

Dr. Zaniello: I guess I'll answer honestly: probably trying to convince my dog that he has had enough of playing fetch so I can go back into my warm house!

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
What inspires you?

Dr. Zaniello: I am always inspired by people that go above and beyond. That do what you hope they'll do, and then do more. You see it all the time in patient care, which makes up for the things we occasionally do wrong!

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
Favorite destination worldwide?

Dr. Zaniello: The Italian Alps. I did a year of high school in Italy and spent a lot of time there. I love the mountain scenery, the skiing and hiking, but particularly the mix of Italian wine and pasta with Austrian sausage and beer. I live in a mountain town now but still want to go there on vacations!

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
What was your first job and what was your biggest on-the-job lesson from that experience?

Dr. Zaniello: I had the luck of being in Silicon Valley for the irrational exuberance of the 1990s and my first job reflected that—I was given far more responsibility than a new college graduate should receive! I learned a lot from doing the wrong things (like, have a good mentor that prevents you from doing the wrong things!) but in particular, I learned what motivates me. My work in those days was mercenary and while it could be fun, it did little to no social good. I realized I needed to do something more mission oriented, and medical school seemed a good fit. And I had no doctors in my family to warn me away from that very, very long journey!

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
If you could change one thing about the skilled nursing payment landscape, what would it be?

Dr. Zaniello: This is an easy one! Better alignment between skilled nursing quality and reimbursement. During COVID-19, skilled nursing facilities showed they could take on higher risk discharges to open up hospital beds. And that they can, through increased use of virtual health and data sharing agreements, participate as a critical part in the care continuum. But the focus today in reimbursement is primarily reducing the length of stay in skilled nursing facilities instead of a focus on quality, and on safe, timely discharges (that prevent readmissions). Classic case of penny wise and pound foolish.

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
What would you say to someone who said working in health care is boring?

Dr. Zaniello: I'd like to think that, given the last two years, no one would ask that today! But I know the pace of change, particularly in healthcare technology—usually sloooow—is off putting to some. But then I point out that with so many advances in technology today, all the devices we wear on our bodies, our ability to talk on video, with anyone, anywhere, are dramatically changing how we deliver care! It's cool you can FaceTime with your cousin overseas, but it's even cooler than we can do patient care that way, too!

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
What does the nursing home of the future look like to you?

Dr. Zaniello: One (very small) silver lining to the pandemic is the increased awareness and use of virtual health. While we are seeing the direct benefits to our customers and patients across the care continuum, use of virtual health in our skilled nursing facilities has been a particular success. You may wonder why they need access, but due to both staffing shortages and the inherent risk in care transitions, virtual health means faster access to more expert care and thus reduces trips to the hospital. Couple virtual health with remote patient monitoring and skilled nursing facilities will be even more deeply integrated into the care continuum.

Q: Skilled Nursing News:
What do you wear to virtual meetings?

Dr. Zaniello: As an infectious disease doc, I was early in the clinical setting with getting rid of the tie and white coat (as they were really good ways to spread disease between your patients). The side benefit was a reduction in formality and a better doctor/patient relationship. I've almost done the opposite in the virtual setting, trying to be a little more formal, dress up a bit to signal that we're working here, not just hanging out! Don't get me wrong—you won't see me on Zoom with a tie—but I try to have a clean button-down shirt and (occasionally) pants. I mean I always wear pants! But you'll never know.