

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNT AND THE NEW NORMAL AS I SEE IT

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It was the year 2030, and I was working as an anaesthesiologist, at a large tertiary care hospital. I had been tasked with the writing of a memorandum of the events of the last decade and their impact, as a learning exercise for the residents. I paced around my office trying to think about how to approach this job of historian that had been foisted upon me. The idea of the project was to start with the year 2020 and chart our progress in the years that followed. Mulling over the past in my head, I was forced to acknowledge that life now was nothing like the life we had enjoyed before the pandemic. Although a lifetime away, memories of 2020 felt fresh and real; almost like a still life oil painting. We had developed a new 'normal'.

The World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a 'public health emergency of international concern' on the 30th of January 2020 which then progressed into the COVID-19 pandemic by March 11th, 2020.

Before 2020, life had moved at a break-neck pace, with an unhealthy level of competitiveness, and reckless greed. Consumerism was the name of the game and the motto - 'The more, the merrier'. We had produced catastrophic amounts of waste, filling our oceans, polluting our waters, and poisoning the air. COVID-19 shook the foundations of how we lived, how we consumed, and how we loved. It was like someone, somewhere, had hit a giant 'pause' button; every aspect of our daily lives had to be changed. Stringent 'lock-downs' had been imposed across the globe. People were not allowed to leave their homes unless for essential services. Eventually, as time went on, and we got used to our house arrests, so to speak.

Schools and offices came into our homes via group video calls. Cooking came back in a big way as bars and restaurants closed their doors. We spent more time connecting with our loved ones, playing with our children, and getting to know our neighbors. Home workout videos became THE thing as people finally had the time to make health a priority again. As a community, we came together to help the most destitute of us and helped find ways home for those stranded in unfamiliar cities. We became kinder and more empathetic. However, not everyone could come out stronger from their hardships. A lot of individuals succumbed to their mental illnesses during that difficult period. Domestic violence increased; major help hotlines had reported having dramatic increases in the calls they received. Henceforth, we made Mental health a big part of the conversation. People were no longer scared to discuss their feelings of depression or anxiety and women's rights were foremost on the agenda. More help centers were set-up and federal grants were created to allocate resources to the cause. My hospital had a wing dedicated to 'holistic health'; this would not have been the case in a pre-2020 world. We had learned that people were more than just their productivity and their lab values on a trend chart

In addition to the pandemic, the global lock-down had the economy in a stranglehold. Covid19 brought with it catastrophic side-effects as the whole world grappled with a common enemy. In 2007, economist Thomas A. Garret had published a paper wherein he hypothesized a global pandemic and the economic blow-back that would follow. He had estimated that a potential pandemic would cost the world \$800 billion and would lead to a global economic recession, as it had in 1918. COVID-19 had cost us far more; \$11.5 trillion & millions of human lives. The monetary cost of preventing a pandemic, studies showed, would have been equivalent to 2% of the cost of enduring one. Reading these articles now, makes me wonder at what point had we lost the plot? How had we let warnings slip past us? Had our world leaders gambled with their people's trust? In not protecting our future, we had incurred astronomical losses. Millions had been laid off, and they were unable to feed their families and had no means of seeking other employment. The hardest hit, were of course, the already incumbent poor. Those working hand to mouth had suddenly lost both limbs.

Hindsight is 2020, they say. With all the loss and devastation, we were forced to learn a very crucial lesson. Policy mattered. Post pandemic global political balances shifted. The younger generation flooded the polling booths, electing more liberal candidates into power, from the smallest electorates up to the highest offices. What had we voted for? Environmental protection, protection of labor rights, equality, social security, and most importantly – health care. We had fought for continuity, welfare, and life. We had learnt the inviolability of human life; measurable in the mortality rate of the COVID-19 pandemic but incalculable in terms of the loss we had felt at the sudden absence of our near and dear.

Since before the beginning of the millennium, medicine as a field had been growing exponentially. We were at the apex of scientific inquiry and development. People were living longer, mortality rates had declined, and the improbable came to be. With advancement though, came a price. The cost of healthcare grew and prices rose astronomically, making it nearly inaccessible to the uninsured. At the same time, the industry was running on the breaking backs of its ground-level workers; the doctors, nurses, and working staff inside the hospital.

The COVID-19 pandemic BROKE this system. ERs became over-run, ventilators were in short supply, and doctors were graduated out of medical school early. The long shifts had gotten longer, and the gruelling work got tougher. Sick people were coming in, in droves. We had all been caught off guard. It seemed like every day there would be a new guideline. As an anaesthesiologist, it was a particularly scary time. We dealt with the airway all-day, every-day. Simple things had suddenly become a lot more complicated. I would come home every day with a new assortment of angry red marks on my face from the masks we had to wear. I also remember the nagging fear that would follow me home; did I wash everything down properly? Will I get sick? Will I get someone I love, sick?

The ICUs got tougher still. We no longer had visiting hours. We had patients in beds, scared and alone, not being able to see their families. Parents lost children whom they could not say goodbye to; children lost parents to ventilators, that ate them up in tubes and wires. It was heartbreaking. So many years later, I still remember that acute feeling of helplessness. As perioperative and critical care physicians, anaesthesiologists usually met their patients at times of extreme vulnerability. We had the unique role of providing comfort before a possibly life-saving procedure or event. With all my layers of protection, my muffled voice coming through a respirator, I was suddenly not able to do that as well. My patients did not get the comfort that I so badly wanted to give them. Despite having done my job categorically well, I would come out feeling unsatisfied.

The medical field had mourned the loss of so many people during that time. This virus had exsanguinated a system that had already been bursting at the seams. We eventually won the war. But had paid the price of too many lost battles.

When the vaccine finally came out, we rejoiced. Pharmaceutical companies had worked round the clock, to get the impossible done. They pulled through for us in a massive way. No patents were filed, citing Jonas Salk as the inspiration for this selfless move. By 2024, things had finally turned around. But we refused to go back to work the same way. Doctors around the world came together as a united front. We had demanded safer working conditions, healthier work-place environments, and better training. Governments were petitioned and new medical schools and hospitals had been built. Disaster management became a compulsory module in all medical school training programs. Learning to work in temporary hospitals was not just for military doctors anymore. We were trained for the eventuality of another pandemic. We were not going to be caught with our pants down, again.

I sighed deeply, remembering the rallies, the petitions, and finally the new oath we had all taken. Included, was a new addendum to the ancient Hippocratic oath, to keep our patients and OURSELVES from harm. We finally had a better work-life balance, whilst at the same time, studies had shown that patient care and satisfaction had improved drastically. Everybody won. The world had become a better place; a safer place.

The new normal goes beyond washing hands frequently, wearing masks and PPE, altered intubation techniques, newer drugs; the new normal was the change in our thought process that brought about changes in our lives and influenced the way we dealt with the world around us. We learned. And we continue to do so.