

TOPIC- "COVID-19 PANDEMIC; LESSONS LEARNT AND THE NEW NORMAL AS I SEE IT"

THE PROBLEM, AS I SEE IT:

Year 2020 was going to be special, theoretically. The year has first two numbers matching next two and this happens once in a lifetime. Then COVID19 pandemic was announced which was as a result of “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2)”. For someone belonging to my age group this was a first pandemic which was not expected to devastate the life of millions all over the world. Our generation has seen epidemics like the hemagglutinin1-neuraminidase1 (H1N1), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), middle east respiratory syndrome (MERS) and NIPAH which came, devastated lives and then went into oblivion. What started from a live flesh market in Wuhan, China reached all corners of the world and created a pandemic of devastating proportion.

CHANGES OBSERVED, AS I SEE IT:

We experienced lockdown which was announced by the government for weeks initially and then extended for months. Once the pandemic was announced, the fear in every Anaesthesiologist and Intensivist at all levels was inevitable. We considered every person COVID19 positive unless proved otherwise initially. Earlier before taking a case for surgery Anesthesiologists’ used to confirm fasting status, American Society of Anesthesiologists'-physical status (ASA-PS). Now everyone was interested in investigations like computed tomography chest for COVID-19 Reporting and Data System (CO-RADS) grading, lactate dehydrogenase (LDH), lymphocytes in percentage and any travel or exposure history. Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction

(RT-PCR) became the new norm as a part of surgical profile prior to surgery. Later when the pathogenesis started getting more understood, we realized that RT-PCR which is performed on the throat swab taken from a suspect could be negative but the person could still spread disease via aerosol. After medical graduation, all of us thought we understood viral infections pretty well. But SARS-CoV-2 made us realize that medical fraternity still does not understand the pathogenesis, epidemiology of spread, period of infectivity and unexplained routes of transfer really well. Hospitals were not able to manage the initial burden of sick patients, treat them, quarantine them in a hospital setup or rehabilitate them adequately. It was very distressing to see patients dying in the hospital after extremes of suffering or dying due to inability to procure a bed or a ventilator in a dedicated hospital. The pandemic revealed the loop holes in the existing healthcare infrastructure.

MANAGING PANDEMIC, AS I SEE IT:

Next were the anecdotal reports from several researchers regarding managing COVID19 starting with hydroxyl-chloroquine sulfate or HCQS. Never was such an interest seen in people all over the world to procure a medication over the counter. To add to this US President announced it in front of media the magic of HCQS which further propelled its sales at a price much higher than the printed price. HCQS prophylaxis was criticized in leading journals in coming months leaving everyone confused whether they were protected all these days or they harmed themselves. Soon drugs like remdesivir, tocilizumab, zinc supplements, ascorbic acid, and low molecular weight heparin were explored in patient management. Clinicians all over the world were managing this new disease without any hardcore evidence as all above mentioned drugs were found helpful in other viral infections and efficacy in moderate to severe COVID19 patients was more of an expert opinion or anecdotal.

THE NEW NORMAL, AS I SEE IT:

The importance of hand rub with alcohol based solution before and after touching a patient is well known and is established evidence. But many were callous to follow this earlier. The pandemic emphasized the importance of hand rub to clinicians and general public alike. Now everyone is carrying a portable sanitizer in pocket, keeping one in car and at the entrance of their house.

The use of internet was phenomenally high during the pandemic. The school became online, conferences became online webinars. Post-graduate and clinical fellowship exams were conducted online. Once it was understood that infections spreads via aerosols and fomites, role of personal protection equipments (PPE) was explored. Several companies came forward with respirators as they found new customers in hospitals. They managed to convince clinicians who were earlier so particular about evidence based medicine (EBM) and now started buying these products for their safety. One thing was obvious, when it comes to threat to life to hell with EBM.

Clinicians started working in batches or shifts depending on the type of set-up and number of people. The phobia was obvious; going home as carriers, staying with kids and parents. Hospitals having well equipped facilities made COVID19 packages. They also developed affordable packages for not so economically sound families. As all hotels were shut down, the far-sighted hospital managements tied up with hotels and offered asymptomatic, affording COVID19 positive patients a stay in hotels were they were assured to have round the clock duty doctors, trained nurses and a consultant visiting them at least once. The package also included meals for patient and attending family members along with routine investigations. The discrimination was

obvious. Sadly there were deductions in remunerations paid to many clinicians due to losses incurred to the hospital. The clinicians who were working as freelancers or on a fee-for-service basis also faced monetary losses. The COVID warriors were now afraid whether they could afford treatment for themselves and their dear ones. Till date more than 100 doctors in India diagnosed with COVID19 have succumbed fighting the infection.

LESSONS LEARNT:

The pandemic has taught us many relevant lessons. Firstly it has taught us to wear the mask correctly. The practice of wearing masks in operating rooms is more than a century old but COVID19 pandemic has made us realize how to wear it effectively. Earlier we use to wear whatever mask was provided by the hospital. Now we know what is right and what is wrong and we insist on a 3-ply surgical mask. We were aware about N95 masks after the H1N1 epidemic but now we understood the importance even better. We now know that there is filtering face piece (FFP) 1/2/3 N95 mask, N99 masks, N100 masks. Wearing a mask every time, social distancing and hand hygiene has now become the new normal and we must understand that this new normal is going to be a part of our lives for a long time. One point which everyone should understand is that no one could possibly escape COVID19 infection. What is important is to take measures so that the viral load that one gets exposed is less. Whenever in doubt get yourself investigated and self-quarantine in your own and others interest. The pandemic has scared us to such an extent that we prefer staying home if there are no clinical responsibilities. This gave us a wonderful opportunity to spend time with kids, parents and also taught us certain essential household chores like washing, cooking, cleaning to name a few. Whenever at home one can now pursue an old hobby like reading, listening music or playing musical instruments, gardening, writing etc.

An important aspect that the pandemic has taught us is value of life. Suddenly everyone is scared for obvious reasons and is worried about the future. The common doubts are what if I get the infection? What if I get serious and do not make it? What if I get hospitalized and do not get paid or lose an existing job? These are pertinent questions which increase our stress levels whenever the thought crosses our minds. The pandemic has taught us how planning for future is important, why it is important to save money and invest our hard earned money wisely. It was really sad to know that many young nursing staff and other allied health care workers left the job and went to their respective towns and villages due to fear of infection. The fear was mostly due to many doctors, nurses and other health care workers becoming victim to the disease and eventually losing the battle in the fight. On the other side, daily wages workers lost their jobs as the work were either prohibited by government or they were asked to leave. An added problem was restriction in transport facilities, both personal and public transport system. The biggest worry due to the loss of employment, loss of earning would be the rise in crime rate once people become desperate and have no other means to sustain.

Once pandemic was declared I am sure all of us recollected our old times in school, graduation and post-graduation days. There were many friends whom we had lost contact for some or the other reasons. There were people whom we stopped talking too for petty reasons. Now that we are grown up and are unsure about the future, this is an opportunity to rebuild relations again. A small conversation and knowing the whereabouts and family life of your old friends will definitely reduce the stress and bring a smile on either faces.

To conclude wearing mask, hand hygiene and social distancing is the new normal and this should be followed seriously.