

Lessons from COVID-19 Pandemic: What's Next?

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Going back to the beginning this year, I believe most of us have been skeptical when the news started to broadcast the novel viral infections in China. Most of us, including myself, thought it was nothing more than regular influenza virus. As we know, influenza virus infection has placed a substantial burden on the health of many each year. There are considerable number of hospital admissions and deaths due to influenza virus globally. Yet, fast forward seven months later, we are currently in the midst of a worldwide pandemic; a pandemic that has changed our lives beyond recognition. This virus has claimed lives of many, including healthcare workers. Everyone has been affected both directly and indirectly. Some has suffered weeks due to the infection itself, some has suffered the loss of their loved ones, and many are affected financially.

Fears and anxiety have grown across the globe; fear of getting infected, fear of losing their jobs and even fear of the unknown. We started this pandemic with many uncertainties, and we have been frustrated with the situation. It is a challenge on the global level as this virus recognizes no boundaries. Government works side by side with their people to lower the rate of infection and the number of new cases, eventually. I believe everyone bears a great responsibility for the wellbeing of others.

As junior anesthesiologist, we face unique challenges. Most of the older professionals have stepped back to lower the risk of getting infected. Many of junior doctors and nurses are asked to volunteer at the emergency hospital dealing with COVID-19 patients. At the beginning of the pandemic, there were a lot of the unknowns, especially when the tests were not readily and easily available. Taking care of our patients is definitely not the same. We are afraid of getting infected by our patients, their family, and even our colleagues. Then when some of us are tested positive for the virus, the fear has changed into fear of dying and fear of infecting our loved ones.

After more than half of year battling with this virus, I do believe we, as human race, have learned so much. The fear and anxiety have taught us many things and made us stronger. Even though many of us were separated from others, we have been more connected than before. As an anesthesiologist and healthcare professionals, there are many valuable lessons from this pandemic; some that we learned in a hard way.

#1. Knowledge is constantly evolving. One day, we were told about Chloroquine as one of the treatments for COVID-19 infection then later it was not proven scientifically. There are many changes in diagnostic criteria and treatment for COVID-19 in the last seven months. I remember back in medical school our teacher always emphasized that being a doctor is a lifelong learning as the knowledge of medicine keeps on evolving. From the last seven months we have witnessed that what we know today might not be true tomorrow. Therefore, updating our knowledge is essential. Keeping up with the latest research findings is necessary so we can always deliver the best care for our patients.

#2. Mortality is not merely a number; it's someone's spouse, parents, family or friend. When we have lost someone close to you due to this pandemic, we learn a hard truth. Mortality rate goes beyond a number. As someone who works in the critical care areas, this makes me working harder to prevent this from happening. It is not easy, especially when we have no clue whether the treatment we deliver is the correct treatment or not. But I believe all of us is doing the best that we can to deliver such care.

#3. Solidarity is critical value in our work. I have witnessed people from different backgrounds in the community working together to support each other. I have been amazed and incredibly grateful for our colleagues who have put in extra hours of work to create protocols and cover others clinical work. Globally, many healthcare professionals have reached out one another through webinars and social media to share their experiences and offer help.

#4. Learning to slow down and be kind to yourself. As doctors, we took an oath to always caring for the ill, healing often and comforting always. We are often "burdened" with a

moral duty to always take care of our patients. And yes, this is true. But through this pandemic, we learn that sometimes we have to take care of ourselves as well. I agree when they say: There is no emergency in pandemic. Make sure you wear appropriate personal protective equipment, have some rest when you are exhausted and most of all, be kind to yourself. I have witnessed many healthcare professionals worked without appropriate protective measures. We all do have moral obligation to our patients but we also have moral obligation to ourselves and our loved ones.

Of many lessons learned during this pandemic, the hardest thing we have to learn is accepting the fact that we might never go back to the way it used to be. We might never go back to the same situation a year ago. No more handshake with your patients, no more hanging out with our colleagues in the operating theatre. The “new” normal is what they called it.

Perioperative care has definitely changed into something we never learnt in residency before. Elective surgery becomes more complicated as COVID-19 screening takes place before the scheduled surgery. Emergency surgery is also more intricate as we might not have enough time to do proper assessment. Fortunately, nowadays COVID-19 screening is more accessible as many hospitals and labs are doing the testing.

Wearing proper protective equipment is a must during clinical work. We have to ensure all the healthcare professionals, our colleagues, have access to appropriate protective measures. Not only access for protective equipment, we also have to make sure that we use the protective equipment correctly. Please keep in mind that we have to remain vigilant during this time. Hospital management should create protocols to reduce the risk of infections, especially in the break area or changing room. Testing of hospital staff should be part of the patient safety protocol in the hospital. Healthcare workers might also require access to wellbeing support including counsellors, psychologists or support groups.

I also expect to see the rise of telemedicine during this new normal era. Telemedicine in the perioperative setting has been mentioned quite often in the last decade. However, in our hospital telemedicine consultation is not yet held until this pandemic takes place. It was not easy at first, especially when we are unable to conduct physical examination properly. However, as time goes by, I believe we will get accustomed with this method to conduct perioperative consultation. Not only for perioperative consultation, telemedicine could also be used in the critical care setting to update the family about the condition of their relatives. I think many people will see the upsides of telemedicine in the future.

There are a lot of new things we learn in the field of critical care medicine. Diagnostic procedures and therapy continue to evolve as we study this disease. I believe we can see many new guidelines or protocols in the future in related to critical care medicine. Research and development on the new course of treatment will be the highlight this year. Also, I believe their findings will have some impact on how we take care our patients in the future.

I do believe we enter a brand-new era, a challenging one. Surgery and anesthesia procedure are going to be more perplexing in the future. We are pushed to think outside the box, to figure out how to deliver best care for our patients while maintaining our wellbeing. We cannot linger to the past or the "old" normal. We have to keep moving forward as life goes on. As an anesthesiologist, we will have to make a lot of adjustments in our daily practice to accommodate the new normal era. We have learnt so much in the past seven months, and yet there is so much that we do not know.

Let us keep our heads up and stay hopeful. Have little faith in kindness and humanity. Be positive that we will beat this pandemic together. We will emerge stronger, wiser and better.