

## EDITOR'S PAGE



# Post-COVID-19 Lessons Above Humility and Empathy



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**W**e are all alerted and emotionally exhausted from the COVID-19 pandemic, without any doubt. When I saw my family after 7 months, I felt very emotional, as it was the first time in my life that it had taken so long to see them. Sometimes, I was in doubt whether I would ever see them again.

Here in the United Kingdom, we were hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which time we encountered not only the victims but also the “hidden” victims, those patients who will need long-term support or those caregivers who have been in such emotional distress that it will be difficult for them to completely recover. I feel for my friends and colleagues in the United States and other countries, which are still undergoing the peak of the pandemic.

We encountered extremely sick patients, young patients, with no comorbidities who spent many months in the intensive care unit, dependent on mechanical support. Patients who died without their families, families who would send voice messages to very sick patients in the hope that they would understand while being intubated.

Without a doubt, the debilitating situation of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many teaching points into our everyday life:

1. **Humility:** As Dr. Valentin Fuster and Mrs. Justine Varieur Turco wrote in a wonderful Editor’s Page at the beginning of the pandemic, “We should never forget the importance of being humble and sagacious, both individually and as a society. We are already witnessing glimmers of hope” (1). Indeed, now we are humble in front of what is happening—we are waiting patiently for treatments, for the upcoming vaccine, for hope. From the very beginning, we in the health care field have recognized the value in sticking together through all of this. I have heard much constructive criticism related to which countries were well prepared for

the pandemic with earlier lockdowns, which is tremendously important for the efficient management of COVID-19. However, we should not get into the habit of inefficient, unconstructive criticism wherein political leaders identify others’ performance as better or oftentimes worse. We are all in this together.

2. **Teamwork: respecting each other:** In the United Kingdom, our hospital was one of the main COVID centers in London and, gradually, we are returning to normal practice seeing patients who have been afraid to come to the hospital, even those who may have been very sick. Again, we should not forget what happened a few months ago. It is important to respect each other and all our work together that it took to respond to the daily demands but also to prepare for a potential second wave. A part of mutual respect is also the spread of false information from people who have a poor understanding of COVID-19. We hear a few voices, some of which are unfortunately from my home country, protesting against wearing masks or social distancing. Please trust the scientific evidence, trust what experts say: wear a mask.

3. **Empathy:** We have changed as caregivers. We took a step back, we reflected. Now we have started behaving differently, maybe engaging more with patients, having more empathy for patients and their families. Patients are fearful of the coronavirus, and it is now proven that many preferred to have a heart attack at home rather than coming to the hospital. Families are worried as well, rightfully so. Therefore, it is another teachable moment for us that we need to be more understanding, to have more empathy. Last week, I asked a colleague cardiothoracic surgeon: “When you speak to a patient, are you thinking of them as if that patient was your mother or your father?” Without much thought, he immediately replied “of course,

always.” During COVID-19, his ethos and the way he cared about his patients made me a better clinician and human being. We learn from each other. COVID-19 has shaped us as doctors, human beings, colleagues.

4. **Mindfulness:** When I go to the hospital, I try to live every moment as if I am discovering the place from scratch: I notice the surroundings, I notice my colleagues, the balance between them; every day is a teachable moment for me. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleagues with whom we worked closely died unexpectedly, which was a shock for a many of us. It makes us think that we redefined our priorities, and this respect for each other will maintain. We should remain grateful to be alive, grateful to wake up every morning.
5. **Equality:** As I mentioned previously, we are all in this together: the #Blacklivesmatter movement has been so powerful in the middle of the pandemic, and it needs to be a part of our everyday life. More recently, the #womenempoweringwomen movement has arisen. We are in the middle of 2020, we have been

through the first wave of a pandemic, we have witnessed many deaths around us. If anything, this disease has reinforced for us that we are all equal, regardless of color, sex, age. We need to have institutional policies that reflect those beliefs.

Now more than ever, we have an opportunity to reform as a society in the same way as we reformed as clinicians and human beings. I strongly feel that we should never forget what happened in the past 6 months, and we need to continue to support each other. “And one has to understand that braveness is not the absence of fear but rather the strength to keep on going forward despite the fear.”—Paulo Coelho

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## REFERENCE

1. Fuster V, Turco JV. COVID-19: a lesson in humility and an opportunity for sagacity and hope. *J Am Coll Cardiol* 2020;75:2625-6.