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Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19): Faith healing or science? An old-time problem

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To the Editor—Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) poses a major global challenge, with extreme and economic and social impacts affecting almost every aspect of life. Healthcare systems face unprecedented pressure, resulting in thousands of deaths daily. Intensive care units are the last line of defense against coronavirus. Fortunately, most intensive care unit (ICU) patients are discharged. However, positive outcomes are often attributed from patients and patients' family members to the supernatural power of God. Sadly, there is a strong tendency to blame healthcare professionals, especially critical care physicians, for negative outcomes.

Surprisingly, this attitude is as old as medicine itself. Common failure to appreciate science dates back to the Hippocrates' time. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, flourished in the fifth century BC. His teachings have been preserved in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*, a collection of ~60 medical works. Although their authorship is largely unknown, all works are believed to reflect the principles of hippocratic medicine. In one of the letters to his friend Democritus, Hippocrates states that it was common for good outcomes to be attributed to divine intervention and failures to be charged to caregivers:

“Most people do not praise the successes of medical science, and they often attribute them to the gods. But if nature is recalcitrant and weakens the patient, then they blame the physician and pass over the divine. I think that medical science is allotted more reproach than honor. And, in fact, I myself have not reached the goal of medicine, though I am now old. And indeed,

neither did its founder, Asclepius, but he too, was inconsistent in many things, as books of those who recorded it have conveyed to us.”¹

Similarly, nowadays many people are willing to attribute to supernatural intervention any interference with nature, especially when divine involvement has been requested. The phenomenon has its origin in the fact that most physicians encounter or have encountered outcomes they cannot explain using natural criteria and terms such as spontaneous remissions of incurable malignancies. Although scientific miracles are not clearly defined, most physicians do believe that miracles occur today and that religion is a reliable and necessary guide to life.² However, we should not forget that healthcare professionals risk their own health helping the humanity fight this invisible enemy. Therefore, gratitude is the best attitude.

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