

The COVID-19 Pandemic Memoir: Lessons for Future Challenges

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Letter to the Editor

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The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has indeed made an enormous impact on all walks of life worldwide. Current statistics show that as of March 21, 2023, there have been 761 071 826 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 6 879 677 deaths, reported to the World Health Organization (WHO).¹ The health crisis has already stretched global resources to bare bones with mass violence, instability, and food shortages in some countries derailing the work done toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.² Despite these adverse effects, there was already a significant improvement toward recovery as some countries claimed to have acquired herd immunity. Spain, a country once hard-hit by COVID-19, has more than 80% of its population fully vaccinated and is declining in new cases. The United Arab Emirates has nearly 90% of its citizens inoculated, and life has essentially returned to normal, whereas at least 74% of the entire population of Puerto Rico is fully vaccinated.³ The Republic of Korea (ROK) also shares this improvement due to the high vaccination rate, decreased fatality rate, and oral therapeutics, which may help reduce mortality.⁴ In the Philippines, the National Capital Region (NCR) and 38 other areas were placed under Alert Level 1, which means there is only a minimal to low-risk classification of case transmission. All business establishments can operate at total capacity with minimum health and safety protocol requirements. The dedicated service of general practitioners (GPs) and other health care workers is attributed considerably to these improvements.

As I recalled what had happened throughout the past 2 years of this pandemic, I realized that as the world is exerting the best effort to fight the possible new variants of the virus effectively with a more resilient health care system, it is also essential to consider the learning experiences that have taken place throughout this period. These outcomes are contributory factors to why some of these improvements were achieved. These can also motivate us to be more disciplined and responsible in practicing health protocols and be more critically knowledgeable in discovering pharmacological disease prevention and treatment.

First, the COVID-19 pandemic ignited international cooperation and awakened the spirit of solidarity among different nations and their respective peoples. In a landmark agreement at the G7 summit, global leaders have committed to donating 1 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccine internationally to support global equitable access and to help end the acute phase of the pandemic.⁵ The Government of Japan also donated US \$1 million to WHO and partners to support essential health services interrupted by COVID-19 in Angola. The ROK and the Philippines, which have strong ties and partnerships, showed what “friendship” is. The Government of South Korea has provided the Philippines with about US \$105.3 million worth of assistance from 2020 up to March to help the country in its COVID-19 response.⁶ Last July 2020, the ROK handed over to the Government of the Philippines 600 000 high-quality KF94 masks, 7 walk-through COVID-19 testing booths, 1000 face shields, and 10 000 diagnostic kits. Despite being a developing country, the Philippines is set to donate some of its vaccines to Myanmar and African countries to boost their supply. During the previous lockdowns, some Filipinos established community pantries to help those suffering from extreme poverty and hunger. After a week, over 300 similar donation-driven efforts have popped up across the country. Variations such as community libraries and pantries for pets have appeared, too.⁷

Second, GPs and researchers are noticing some curious and unexpectedly positive side effects of the abrupt shifts in human behavior in response to the pandemic. The “skies are bluer, fewer cars are crashing, crime is falling, and some other infectious diseases are fading from hospital emergency departments”⁸—meaning that the lockdowns and other restrictions decreased vehicle and human mobility. With this, there was a pollution reduction. The short-term effects on the natural environment have attracted attention, notably improved air quality in several European cities, including China, Brazil, and India. The pandemic brought home the interconnectedness between nature and human existence with a renewed understanding of the complex linkages between the economy and the environment.⁹ Regarding crimes, with people remaining indoors, households are better guarded. Hence, robbers and car thieves are more conspicuous, and neighbors are more available to spot them. Private vehicles are safer at home, particularly in garages or driveways. Since many stores and business establishments are closed, assault and robbery are also prevented or lessened. The limited physical interaction through

social distancing and the practice of wearing face shields/masks helped in controlling the spread not only of COVID-19 but also of other communicable diseases.

Third, the crisis brought a rediscovery of the health potential of state intervention. This result showed that some governments could check the strength and limitations of their respective health care system. They eased other inequalities concerning pandemic adverse effects, considered how plans for lifting lockdown can be tailored to minimize harm to disadvantaged groups and to ensure equal enjoyment of the associated benefits, and developed a sustained commitment to reducing social, economic, and environmental inequalities.¹⁰ With this, every government must continue to consider that all their citizens, rich or poor, deserve to receive fair opportunities for primary health care services and equal prioritization for economic recovery.

Lastly, the pandemic created a tremendous learning experience concerning the educational system of all countries worldwide. The school closures and suspension of in-person learning have dramatically changed the platform of the teaching and learning process through an online mode. With the sudden shift in this educational process, many schools strategically found a way to creatively continue the teaching process by stretching and integrating some essential contents and non-negotiable learning experiences into their curriculum. While it is evident that the pandemic caused a lot of stress and mental health issues to both educators and students, everybody was able to adjust and discover various coping mechanisms to battle its harmful effects.

While there is no definite time when the pandemic will officially end globally, reflecting on these valuable positive or negative experiences is essential. The memoir of this pandemic is already embedded in everyone's consciousness and human history. As long as there is cooperation and utmost solidarity among all nations, we

can withstand this pandemic and be more resilient to future challenges.

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