

## Being a Young Physician During COVID-19 Pandemic

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### WHAT'S A PANDEMIC?

Let us start from the beginning. What does a pandemic even mean? Just 3 years ago, when the word pandemic was mentioned, I only thought of scenes from high-grossing dystopian movies starring Brad Pitt or Kate Winslet, but nothing more. Probably none of us predicted such a disaster would happen in the 21st century, the age of science and technology. However, suddenly, we were the main characters in the dystopian movies we had seen, certain that such a thing would never happen in real life. So, after 3 years of struggle, if you ask me now what a pandemic means, this would still be a tough question for me, but I can say with certainty it was a milestone in my life.

### OBSCURITY

Uncertainty has always been inherent in human existence, but at the same time, people have a fundamental need to reduce uncertainty and have control of their lives. When the COVID-19 started, it brought great obscurity along with it. Everyone around the world faced the pandemic unprepared and without experience, and they suddenly lost all control of their lives. This led to great confusion, fear, and anxiety and these feelings grew like an avalanche and caused a global panic. Edvard Munch's famous work, *The Scream*, made in 1893, was like a picture of our feelings. We were all screaming inaudibly in fear and despair. Munch described his painting with these words:<sup>1</sup>

*I was walking along the road with two friends  
The sun was setting  
Suddenly the sky turned blood red  
I paused, feeling exhausted, and leaned on the fence  
There was blood and tongues of fire above the blue-black fjord and the city  
My friends walked on, and I stood there trembling with anxiety  
And I sensed an infinite scream passing through nature.*

The scream felt by the famous painter is very familiar to all of us, considering what we've experienced in the last 3 years. Patients, physicians, and all people around the world were screaming with fear, despair, and anxiety... Edvard Munch's portrait was the reflection of our emotions.

### ETHICAL ISSUES

During the pandemic, as healthcare professionals, we worked under difficult, intense, and stressful working conditions. We have tried to fulfill our responsibilities towards ourselves, our families, colleagues, and patients with all our strength under the guidance of moral values and ethical principles. During this period, one day we felt exhausted and vulnerable, the next day we felt like heroes. We have often been called the true and unsung heroes of the pandemic. The heroic role attributed to us was one of the things I thought about most during the pandemic. Albert Camus had almost answered all the questions in my mind with his

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novel *The Plague*.<sup>2</sup> In his famous work *The Plague*, the Nobel Prize-winning author described a society struggling with the pandemic through the eyes of Doctor Rieux, one of the protagonists of the novel. In a dialogue between Doctor Rieux and his friend Rambert;

*(...) there's no question of heroism in all this. It is a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is common decency.*

*What do you mean by 'common decency'? Rambert's tone was grave.*

*I don't know what it means for other people. But in my case, I know that it consists in doing my job.*

Regardless of time and place, our guide in the medical profession is ethical principles and professional medical values. Regardless of the circumstances, we physicians who tried to perform our profession virtuously did not become heroes in the pandemic, we were already heroes on the day we promised to fulfill the profession of medicine with dignity, it was the day we took the Hippocratic oath.

## POWER OF SCIENCE

The COVID-19 virus was using all the opportunities it got to spread while humanity was still trying to get to know it. The virus and the chaos it brought were spreading rapidly all over the world. On the other hand, humanity was trying to defeat this cruel microorganism by using its greatest power, science.<sup>3</sup> As in the headline of the *Time* magazine 'Vaccine Revolution', an era was closing under the leadership of science and the doors of a new era were opening in which hopes started to bloom.

One of the most important disciplines, which reveals and actualizes science and scientific data in detail, is medicine. The COVID-19 pandemic was the most obvious and recent evidence that has proven this proposal and physicians' undeniable contribution to fighting against the pandemic.<sup>4,5</sup>

## TOGETHERNESS

In addition to all the difficulties, sorrows, and losses we have experienced, the pandemic has caused everyone to question themselves, their relationships with their relatives, their profession, social and global order. While humanity was going through an age where individualization was at its peak, people

faced the necessity of a universal struggle by acting with the awareness of unity against a common problem.

In the first days of the pandemic, I watched something on the news that affected me a lot. It was about the aid boxes sent from China to Italy in March 2020. A note was attached to every box; this was like advice sent to today's humanity from centuries ago. In the note it was written, "We are waves of the same sea, leaves of the same tree, flowers of the same garden." The famous philosopher Seneca was guiding humanity going through a difficult time.

The pandemic is a deadly tragedy and a horrific disaster. But it's also a lesson for humanity, an opportunity to set aside differences and to understand the importance of togetherness. A virus that sees no difference between people can teach us that there is ultimately no difference between people and to fight together is the only way to win the war against one of the most dangerous challenges this world has faced in our lifetime.

After 3 years, when I think about those days, I can still feel the fear, despair, and worry in my bones. But I can certainly say that thanks to my colleagues at Cerrahpaşa Medical Faculty, my colleagues in Turkey, and my colleagues all around the world I've never felt alone. So, I would like to thank each of you for your support, compassion, and love. It was an honor and privilege to share the field of battle with you and it always will be.

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