

How do you think medicine and the world will change after the pandemic of Covid-19 is over?

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

- *The Second Coming, William Butler Yeats*

When news of COVID-19 first emerged, I was on the respiratory wards. It was my first term in 5th year, and after a year of research everything clinical appeared new and wondrous. At that time, COVID-19 was a little-known disease in a city I'd never heard of. But as I've learnt in life and medicine, things are unpredictable. A well patient can crash, a dying patient can recover. We don't control the final outcome; we simply try to guide it. So, as the world changed so did the medicine around me. Halfway through my orthopaedics rotation, elective surgeries stopped, exams were halted, and doctors and students were suspended in a twilight zone of uncertainty. I became a quiet, but active observer of history.

I distinctly remember receiving a call from my dad, an actuary, logical by nature. It went something along the lines of 'so I guess we can't see you anymore' and I said, 'I guess so'. There was more, but that was the core. I'm sure the same conversation was echoing across the globe, neatly slicing the population into two groups, the frontline and the not-so-frontline. And between them was me, the medical student, the reserve on a varsity team, running laps at every training, redshirted on the sidelines of the game. Living with the constant itch of 'I'm here but I'm not doing enough', an insidious imposter syndrome that follows so many of us like a second shadow. Other students expressed concern over their ambiguous role, the ultimate fear: becoming part of the problem, instead of the solution – what if they spread it home, or to staff or even patients, what if, what if, what if?

The notion of a pandemic is not new. It shouldn't have been surprising to watch COVID sneak its tendrils across the globe, and for many, it wasn't. As someone obsessed with literature my mind went to war poets writing of the Spanish flu, Yeats pondering the Second Coming as he watched his world respond to the destruction. Or even further back in time to the black plague that tore apart the fabric of Europe's medieval society. This wasn't that. We weren't those civilisations. We understood public health, we had Centres for Disease control, epidemiologists and resources. We were prepared.

But we also weren't.

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This pandemic has highlighted the inextricable link between effective government and medicine in providing good healthcare. One can't exist successfully without the other. As some countries listened to health experts and instigated travel bans and social distancing, others like Italy and the United States, were slow to respond, catapulting themselves into chaos. An episode of *The Daily* podcast summed it up frighteningly, where an Italian respiratory physician described the process of deciding who received ventilators. My skin prickled at the thought, it was like a horrifying ethics tutorial coming to light.

For many countries, this was a wake-up call, exposing broken healthcare systems and under-resourced public health sectors. I'm hopeful what will emerge will be a reworking of healthcare systems that buckled under COVID's pressure. Nonetheless, those people and places will be forever transformed. Death has a way of sticking to us, like anyone who's experienced grief will know. It makes you see the world in a slightly different way, like frosted glass that's just been cleared. It crystallises what's important. Each one of those numbers lost was a life. That won't go away when the pandemic ends. It'll stay, an invisible scar, the same way war lives on in the people it touches. It's more than a memory.

For Australia, thus far, the change has been primarily preventative. We haven't had the explosion yet, it's possible we never will. And if that happens, what will the world have learnt? How will it be changed? Will we be changed?

In my eyes, COVID-19 has unveiled a troubling undercurrent of distrust in science among the general population. Although this discontent is highlighted most noticeably in protests in America, with events such as [armed crowds storming Michigan's state capitol](#), there exists a concerning apathy and disbelief in government and medical authorities. When a crowded picture of Bondi Beach emerged, half of Australia was outraged, whilst the other half didn't understand the problem. Where does that fault lie? A gut reaction from an informed medical professional might be anger, but I don't think that's fair.

We live in an era where we have unfettered access to information to become informed, but there's also unfettered information. Those of us well-educated in science have been provided the skills to discern good studies from bad studies and to be critical of what we read. But that's the exception and we forget that. Medical school is based around learning how to diagnose and treat conditions. We spend years studying minute details until medical jargon becomes second nature. At some point on our journey we forget to some extent what it's like not to understand. That's where the judgement comes in. How could someone not understand the need for social distancing? How could they not grasp what a pandemic means? There must be something wrong with *them*.

I see it as an opportunity. I think there are missing links in the way we communicate medicine to the greater public. As students we're in a rare position to recognise this. We've only just put our foot in the door, we still know what it's like to see a jumble of words and not understand their significance. I hope we take this pandemic as a reminder to be compassionate and patient with the general public. To listen to their concerns and communicate what we know about diseases and research. There shouldn't be a gulf between us and the rest of the public, but rather a continuous exchange, that isn't dominated by condescension.

Although pandemics create red-tape and endless sticky dots and temperature checks, they also force us to tear it down. We ask ourselves the questions, what is necessary and what is not? Does this patient actually have to come in for a clinic, or could their care be managed just as effectively remotely. No change has been as significant as that of the uptake in telemedicine. It's catapulted us further down the line of acceptance, due to necessity, breaking down rigid structures and resistance from some practitioners. Seeing its success with many specialties such as general practice, we may be able to offer patients more flexible management when they struggle to make in-person consultations. This change extends to the rest of the world, with many professionals

working from home, the power of technology is being realised. When COVID-19 is over, those capabilities will still be there, potentially providing many workers more job flexibility in working from home.

On a broader level COVID-19 and social distancing measures have emphasised the importance of human connection. The other week I ran into a friend walking through the corridors, our eyes lit up and our bodies moved in habitually for a hug, it's our handshake. Only this time they jolted awkwardly as we both in unison remembered the world isn't quite the same. The air was lava, our bodies were vectors, undiagnosed patients and potential headlines waiting to happen. You could feel the distance between us, nervous laughter, an elbow bump and a 'when this is all over' exclamation before promptly parting ways. That's the fascinating part, the assurance of that 'when this is all over', things will return to normal. And they will, mostly. Doctors will once again populate seats in cafes and interns will cram themselves around tiny computer desks, but some things will change, and they should.

I think we'll place a larger value on the everyday that we often take for granted. Seeing our families, hugging our friends, going out and experiencing the wonders of human life. I don't know how long that will last, but I hope it's a gratitude that we ingrain within ourselves. To acknowledge how extraordinary the simple things are.

Because they are extraordinary.

There are times in every generation where we have moments of clarity. Sometimes, terrible clarity, but clarity, nonetheless. This is that moment for us. It's our war, our hurdle, our page in a history book that poets will capture in beautifully crafted lines. We're crafting it right now, how we talk to each-other, to the public, whether we move forward together and grow, or we let tragedy divide us. As a hopeless Yeats lover, another poem comes to mind, Easter 1916, that details the shifting nature of Irish popular opinion following the death of nationalist protesters. It's about how tragedy irrevocably transforms us, but within that horrific transformation there's striking progress.

All changed, changed utterly

A terrible beauty is born.

