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COVID-19 Looking Backward

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It is now more than a year since the momentous onset of the COVID19 epidemic which has taken up so much of our medical and non-medical lives in the months since its description, and now more than a year since Internal Medicine Journal introduced our COVID19 series with an editorial written in April entitled “COVID-19 Looking Forward”¹. Since then, the collection has grown significantly and now is approaching one hundred papers.

The collection is of course diverse and includes many guidelines, only some of which are cited here, reflecting the need for a change in practice in various specialties^{2 3 4}, especially the effects of telehealth^{5 6 7}. Also prominent are descriptions of how different groups have responded to the pandemic in the form of cohort studies^{8 9 10}, and sharing individual experiences as case reports^{11 12}, but also marked is the number of editorials and reflections on what the pandemic means to us as individuals, medical systems and societies^{13 14 15}.

This tsunami of papers, has been noted elsewhere¹⁶, and reflects enormous growth in knowledge and interest surrounding the pandemic, though it has to be noted the total number of manuscripts received by IMJ went from 1494 in 2019 to 2160 in 2020 of which only 284 were COVID related. To the time of writing in July 2021, 419 COVID-19 related papers have been submitted to IMJ, of which 25% have been accepted. We have been very careful to ensure that accepted COVID-19-related submissions have met appropriate academic standards while acknowledging the need for timely publication of those accepted. Globally, it has been estimated that there have been more than 500,000 COVID-19 related publications to date.¹⁷

Doctors have written about epidemics at least since the time of the eponymous work attributed to Hippocrates more than 25 centuries ago to tell “what has already come to pass, understand what is happening now, (and) forecast what is to come”¹⁸. Thucydides, though not a doctor, used similar words in his description of the Great Plague of Athens “I will tell it how it was, so that if it ever should occur again, someone ... might be able to gain foreknowledge and not be in the dark”¹⁸.

Doctors and other health care workers have often played a role in paying witness to their patients and the events around them. Perhaps this has been especially so in a pandemic where so many have died isolated, away from the comfort of their loved ones. When *Médecins Sans Frontières* was founded by doctors and journalists in response to the Biafran War, the concept of *témoignage* or bearing witness was placed as one of the key values of the organisation. In particular, when we write about our patients we are writing in order to bear witness to them, and when we read those works we are also bearing witness in turn to the experience of their writers, which is us.

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