



The Whimper of Success versus the Crashing Sound of Failure

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In an attempt to provide relevance to our Members, there is a unique challenge to writing a piece about what dominates the practice of medicine, at this time—COVID-19. On one hand, life has ground to a screeching halt for many in the public, and even for some of our colleagues. Conversely, information gathering and unfolding of models predicting surges, peaks and plateaus, seemingly change by the minute. So how then does one decide what will be relevant 30 days from now? Maybe leaning on a little faith would do. After all, it seems to almost be an unavoidable coping/management strategy at this time, whether it is faith in a Higher Power, faith in epidemiological data, or a well-grounded faith in both. In that vein, I hope that as you are reading this month's President's Page, we find ourselves in the "Throes of the Whimper of Success," as opposed to the "Crashing Sound of Failure."

As of today, April 13, it would appear that the efforts in North Texas are working, in terms of slowing the transmission of COVID-19, and in doing so, flattening the curve. I must acknowledge that even "uttering out loud" these statements results in pangs of anxiety shooting through me. It is, however, almost impossible to type with crossed fingers. If, however, we did "get this right," our experience will be much different than that of New York City, or many other areas around the world. We will experience the "whimper of a success." We will feel as though we had collectively overreacted, and that will be the truest of indications that we "got it right." While I believe we in Medicine intuitively understand this, we will have to message this effectively to the public. We will have to message it effectively, when some of us may not, in fact, believe it in our own heart of hearts. Because maybe some of us have been just

as impacted, negatively, by all of the right actions. Yet, the truth remains the same, "victory" will not come with horns blowing from Heaven, or ticker tape parades with signs proclaiming "Victory!" hoisted outside every hospital in North Texas.

There is one outcome, however, that could carry the energy, the noise, the "volume" of a typical victory. That outcome would be the deafening, crashing sound of failure. It would be the sound of our physician, nursing, and allied health colleagues lamenting that supplies of PPE have been exhausted, with an endless stream of COVID-positive patients at the door. It would be the lament of families interviewed on the evening news, recounting the fact that scores of their loved ones died because the "hospital and doctors said there wasn't a machine for them" or that "they had to pull my mother off a machine, for another person, because they said they couldn't help her anymore."



It would be discussions over teleconference of Triage Committees, across the region, discussing SOFA (Sequential Organ Failure Assessment) scores, and which of the patients under their care would be told that we “have nothing available to attempt to help save their lives.” It would be the crushing, yet imperceptible and inaudible sound of heartbreak.

On many levels both outcomes have their downsides, but I suspect most would agree that we would rather have the “whimper of success” over the “crash of defeat” any day. What then, could be so bad about the “whimper?” Firstly, the strain that has been inflicted on our society, as a whole, can never be understated. The extent of the strain on health care, and on physicians, as leaders of healthcare teams, will never

be able to be measured. Furthermore, I believe we would serve ourselves well by acknowledging that, unlike other wars where troops have returned from battle, ultimately victorious (and I continue to have faith we will), they are greeted with celebration, with “noise.” Our victory, when it comes to pass, will be a “whimper” at best. Sure, there will be accolades, thank you cards, television commercials and heart-warming GIFs on Facebook. But if we “get this right,” the House of Medicine will be a nameless individual behind an N-95. On many levels, I also suspect that will be okay with many of us, as we did not become physicians, or other healthcare professionals, with visions of ticker tape parades, or “Heroes welcomes” when we are finally able to get back to our favorite Tex-Mex restaurant. But internally, we do

need to feel like we won. We need to feel validated that the anticlimactic whimper of a pandemic victory was truly a win. That the inconveniences, sacrifices, and sufferings that we advocated for, from our leaders, were necessary and justified to prevent more ultimate sorrow. We will need to remind ourselves, and each other, that the quietness of the success we are shooting for should not be interpreted as a lack of appreciation, a lack of effort, a lack of service, or a lack of doing the right thing. The silence, the whimper, is a testament to the strength of the House of Medicine, to our Principles, to our foundation of Respect for Persons and our unceasing drive for beneficence and non-maleficence. It is a reminder of our thousands of years of commitment to societal justice.

So, leaning on a good bit of faith, in every direction, it is my hope—no prayer—when you are reading this, my colleague, my friend, that no matter what the “volume” of the world around you, you hold your head high, be strong, and keep your soul grounded in the knowledge that you are appreciated and loved by your fellow physicians. **DMJ**

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