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## Society of Asian Academic Surgeons

# Work in the Time of Coronavirus



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It was a meditation on life, love, old age, death: ideas that had often fluttered around her head like nocturnal birds but dissolved into a trickle of feathers when she tried to catch hold of them.

—Gabriel García Márquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

As surgeons, we pride ourselves on our sterility. We have made a home of the aseptic operating room, where *don't touch your face* is a lesson learned on day 1. We don gown and gloves and communicate behind mask and shield, all to keep ourselves and our patients safe. However, with the advent of the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, we now find ourselves unable to scrub out at the end of the case. Sterile technique has leaked into the public domain, marked not only by how expensive hand sanitizer has become or how frequently we are reminded to wash our hands, but also by the ways we have come to treat one another.

It is undeniable that the social distancing movement is critical in quelling the exponential spread of this virus. Unfortunately, for Asians, this social sterility has left in its wake a sense of isolation and blame. During the last few months, there have been countless stories of racism and xenophobia toward individuals of Asian descent. Although these accounts have ranged from derogatory comments (“Get your coronavirus out of my country!”) to battery and assault, less talked

about are the subtle moments—the stare of a stranger on the street, fear of coughing or sneezing in an elevator, and the unshakable unrelenting feeling that you are different, that you do not belong.

These sentiments and experiences have not been lost on the Asian doctor. As physicians and resident physicians, we took an oath to help the sick and suffering, even those who are distrustful or prejudiced against us. Every moment in the hospital, we put ourselves and the people we love at greater risk of contracting the virus, because this profession is more than work, it is a calling. But, when patients refuse to be seen by anyone “Asian-looking” and when care and concern is met with bigotry and hate, it is an understatement to say that it hurts. It becomes one more pebble in a shoe full of rocks, another sign and symptom contributing to a plaguing imposter syndrome.

Apart from the threat of illness and death, fear is perhaps the most virulent part of COVID-19. Fear that a stranger will infect us, that others will take all the supplies we need to survive, and that looking out for someone else will cause us to suffer. It may be true that these feelings and attitudes toward Asian-Americans were always there, hidden underneath the surface, but fear has brought them to a head in these perilous times. As the gravity of this situation increases and the attention on Asians as a target for this virus ebbs, replaced by

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a general paranoia of one another, the disappointment and disillusionment remain. It is for this reason that, in a time of physical isolation, community is more important than ever.

Fear, panic, and hysteria are around us, but in this time, the time of coronavirus, we have also known kindness, empathy, and love. We have seen self-sacrifice, generosity, innovation, and creativity, but, as Asians in this country, we must practice one more virtue—forgiveness. As Asian physicians, we must support one another and learn to practice empathy for our fellow human beings, our patients, because despite the intolerance we have experienced, we have a job to do. This is a moment like no other, an opportunity to meet the challenge

placed before us, to care for those who do not care for us and cannot care for themselves. There is little doubt that we will rise to the occasion, but in the quiet moments, when you feel drained, alienated, and alone, remember you are one part of a greater whole. Reach out, send a message, bump elbows in the hall, and do not forget that, although we may not be okay right now, we will be.

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### Disclosure

The authors reported no proprietary or commercial interest in any product mentioned or concept discussed in this article.