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Being a Doctor Will Never Be the Same After the COVID-19 Pandemic

In March 2020, an epidemic has developed in northern Italy with an intensity and strength that surprised everyone. As we write, there are 20,603 coronavirus cases in Italy, 1809 deaths, 2335 recoveries, and 1672 patients in the intensive care unit (ICU). Of those, 10,043 cases, 767 of which are ICU patients, are in Lombardy.

The rapid increase of the contagion forced all area hospitals to morph rapidly from general or specialized care facilities to dedicated “COVID structures.” Nearly all elective procedures have been postponed and only emergency care has continued. Emergency departments are filled with patients coming in for respiratory distress and fever, and the number of contagions increases daily. Streets are empty, shops are closed, children are staying at home, and the only sound to be heard all day long is the sirens of the ambulances rushing people to hospitals. Regular hospital wards are now called COVID 1, COVID 2, and so on. Every single medical professional is involved. Surgeons have gone back to school to study the respiratory system, gynecologists are now applying noninvasive mechanical ventilation, and cardiologists have become intensivists. There are no longer any subdivisions in our work.

The COVID pandemic has forced us Italian doctors to return to the roots of our job and to the reasons behind our care for patients. We are facing something that, for the moment, remains out of our control. The treatment we provide for these patients is substantially supportive and its outcome largely depends on the condition of each patient. Often, all we can do is accompany these people and assist them until their outcome is revealed.

We must remind ourselves that fighting every disease means facing it with intelligence and realism, risking what

is necessary. Coronavirus warns us that life is not in our hands, something that, as medical doctors, we often forget. We are all in the trenches, caring for whomever comes, with a simple thought in the forefront of our minds—one that was so clear at the beginning of our careers but has been easily forgotten many times since: Heal if you can, treat as much as possible, and always assist.

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