

## EDITORIALS

### The unseen enemy - COVID-19

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#### INTRODUCTION

Unparalleled, unexpected, unprecedented – words that try to capture the essence of a year with the novel coronavirus – COVID-19. With billions of dollars invested around the globe annually for military defence, we have seen most of the world crippled by an unseen invader – COVID-19, encouraging nations to pay close attention to the various threats that emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases continue to pose.

Described as one of the worst pandemics in the past 100 years<sup>1</sup>, COVID-19 has indeed dealt a remarkable blow to the health sector, educational sector, local and international trade, and travel.<sup>2</sup> According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), about 80 million people have been infected and over 1.8 million dead as of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2020.<sup>3</sup> The direct and indirect effects of the virus on the physical, mental, and emotional health of individuals are still unfolding. Many children have lost a parent, in many cases both, with several families mourning the loss of a loved one or lost economic opportunities. Indeed, nations are grappling with the “new normal”, due to the disruptive effects of the pandemic on social interactions, education, work and of course, healthcare.

As a nation, many policies including the ban on interstate travels and closure of open markets<sup>2</sup>, though admittedly well-intentioned, to contain the spread of the

virus, inadvertently exposed the fragility of our weak food and health systems and lack of social safety nets for the vulnerable in society. The impact of mandatory stay-at-home orders implied reduced access to healthcare for many people with chronic health conditions, as well as those with peculiar needs like pregnant women.

The health system has been tested to its core and revealed yet the resilience of the thousands of healthcare workers, frontliners in the fight against COVID-19. Despite working in often suboptimal conditions, healthcare workers have worked assiduously round the clock to deliver the best possible care to patients and clients. Many have unfortunately been infected with some paying the ultimate price with their lives.

This pandemic has undoubtedly uncovered many fundamental health sector challenges but underscores the need to engage in some serious dialogue to identify opportunities for improvement. There is an utmost need to make concerted efforts towards strengthening our health systems, taking the most rudimentary steps where possible. Addressing issues of health worker shortage, healthcare financing, and finding innovative ways of improving healthcare access. Utilising mobile health and telemedicine services are but a few options to brood over. We need to start thinking outside the proverbial box and look for innovative solutions to our

peculiar problems, unrelenting in advocating for better working conditions and improved outbreak preparedness.

In a world of increasing data needs and rapidly evolving big data analytics, surely, we must strive to generate, curate, and disseminate our data to reflect the felt health needs and define future research priorities.

While in the midst of this pandemic, we must endeavour to stay and work safe, take responsibility for our actions with regards to curbing the spread of the disease including the dissemination of accurate information, continuing to advocate for safer working conditions, as well as treating each patient with respect and dignity.

Nevertheless, while COVID-19 is very much a present reality, we should not forget the double burden of infectious and non-infectious diseases plaguing us, among which include newborn mortality, malnutrition, childhood pneumonia as well as chronic health conditions as diabetes and hypertension. As we navigate the stormy pandemic, we do not need to lose sight of these other pressing health priorities. Hence, this edition captures some of the contemporary issues affecting the practice of medicine in the tropics.

The Gazette of Medicine has so far enjoyed the pristine leadership of the outgoing Editor, Dr Charles Okpani, whose shoes are big to fill. I must however take on with great humility and responsibility this role and hope for a most progressive year for our Journal.

Looking forward to a positively memorable ride.

Enjoy this issue and stay safe!

## References

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2. Andam K, Edeh H, Oboh V, Pauw K, Thurlow J. Impacts of COVID-19 on food systems and poverty in Nigeria. *Advances in Food Security and Sustainability*. 2020;5:145.
3. World Health Organisation. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard; 2020 [Cited 2020 Dec 31]. Available from <https://covid19.who.int/>.