

# Editorial

Volume 19 Number 3, October 2020

## An Exigent Need: Individual Social Responsibility

As a medical student several decades ago, pandemic was a term that was alien to me, belonging only in history books. We had to learn and conceptualize its meaning. Unfortunately, our generation has had the misfortune of living through one, the aftermath of which may adversely affect mankind for decades. It has created uncertainty beyond comprehension and universally impacted every individual to varying degrees. Nothing in our lifetime has been so profound. On that note, I would like to briefly analyse, with a degree of trepidation, the general response to this existential threat to millions.

Science has advanced rapidly and contributed immensely to every aspect of human life. The advent of uncontrolled capitalism in the Western world since the middle of the last century and its subsequent worldwide propagation in the guise of globalisation has resulted in a world deprived of what I would call the 'essence of life'. Materialism and individualism are the driving forces in this day and age with each of us aspiring to be in privileged positions. Our fervent belief prior to this pandemic was mankind's action alone shaped the future of our planet. We assumed that our modern, sophisticated technologies would help mitigate even natural disasters. The COVID-19 crisis, however, has put these notions to rest, and in the process has exposed the moral bankruptcy of the human race.

The response to this crisis, ranging from the most affluent nations to the less developed, demonstrates the fragile nature of our globalized civilization and the glaring need for global strategy in health governance. To this day, the World Health Organization (WHO) has failed to unite countries in forming a single approach to this catastrophe. We have in the past, witnessed the United Nations Security Council convene regularly as emergency sessions to discuss the imposition of sanctions or the waging of wars at the behest of certain permanent member states. Unfortunately, these same states do not seem to possess the enthusiasm to come together to combat the pandemic.

Ironically, as of today, developing countries such as Mongolia and Vietnam have been more successful in preventing COVID-19 deaths than their wealthier counterparts. The United States of America has the ignominious distinction of being the world's biggest failure in tackling the pandemic.

The catastrophic responses to the current pandemic in most countries is mainly attributed to the lack of adherence to government imposed regulations by vast segments of society. Over the years, these countries have extolled virtues such as individual rights, civil liberties and freedom of expression. In exercising these privileges, a significant segment of the population are, unfortunately, self-centred and insensitive to basic human values such as compassion and empathy that should serve as the guiding principles in people's lives. Their relentless pursuit of decadence has been unrestrained until the pandemic hit this year. It appears that 2020 has emerged as the year of reckoning for most of us.

The appalling situation in virtually all the nations demonstrate a need for a different approach to manage the current crisis. We may have to constrain concepts such as individual rights, civil liberties and freedom of expression for the greater benefit of the populace. Uninhibited individual or group behaviour confounds the basic strategy of isolation, testing, contact tracing and physical distancing required to curtail the spread of COVID-19 pandemic. Individual social responsibility (ISR) that refers to an individual's perception of what he or she should do in order to help society is central for curtailing the pandemic. It's the moral responsibility one has to conform in a way that his or her activities do not affect the people around that person.

Malaysia has been very successful in managing the pandemic thus far, by strict adherence to government imposed regulations. Despite these stringent control measures, individuals and groups

violating these rules are evident almost daily, incurring the wrath of authorities and resulting in aptly deserved fines and jail sentences.

As academicians and clinicians, we have a crucial role in the current situation. Our task is to revive the concept of individual social responsibility in all our interactions. Individual and collective morality and responsibility is the foundation of Islam. Each member of a society must fulfil his own obligations and rely on others to fulfil theirs.

As stated in the concept of Maqasid al-Shariah, to preserve the five necessities is vital, of which “to protect life” essentially refers to protecting personal and public health. This pandemic is a clear threat to both and it is binding upon us to strictly adhere to these lofty ideals in whatever way possible.

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