Depictions of pandemics have everlasting power when presented through the lens of literary authors and poets. Written stories infused with health crises have often endured more poetically than the expert descriptions of physicians, perhaps because the words of authors speak to people in ways that ours, as physicians, cannot. Where we present numbers and statistics, novelists and poets present humanity’s concerns and tribulations. Where we describe the physical manifestations of a disease, literary authors go beyond and describe societal and mental ramifications.

From pestilence to cholera, the Spanish Flu to AIDS, pandemics are paradigm-shifting events; they shake humanity to the core, unveiling the weaknesses in society’s foundations, highlighting the limitations of medicine, and exposing a widespread emotional turmoil. They also serve as a frequent topos in literature—the dramatization of pandemics offers insightful records, particularly with regard to their extensive psychological effects.

**FEAR AND ANXIETY**

Pandemics are characterized by harrowing anxiety, particularly with an impending fear of death. The Scottish poet Murdo Young conveyed this fear of looming death in his 1813 epic poem *Antonia*, where he described the horrors of the Malta plague epidemic:

Where every face betrayed the secret dread

Who next will swell the number of the dead? (Young, 1818)

Similarly, in 1982, Tim Dlugos verbalized this feeling of doom that hovers during pandemics in his succinct, but poignant, four-verse poem *My Death*:

when I no longer

feel it breathing down

Dlugos never specifically stated that this poem was written about the AIDS pandemic, but the time of writing—a year after a mysterious ailment started spreading among the gay community—and his own eventual death from AIDS complications in 1990 seem to point to such a conclusion. The poem, however, can easily be used to describe the characteristic foreboding experienced with any anxiety.

What is also noteworthy is that during situations of terror, we come to associate harmless stimuli as harbingers of horror. One such example is the bell, which during the Great Plague of London became the “plague bell” that was rung at night when all the dead were being buried as a reminder of the looming threat. In his 1722 work *Due Preparations for the Plague as Well for Soul as Body*, Daniel Defoe writes:

“By this time they heard a bell go ringing nightly along the streets, but they knew not what it meant, it not being like the sound of the ordinary bellman... at length their porter informed them that the number of people that died was so great in the outparts that it was impossible to bury them in form or to provide coffins for them, nobody daring to come into the infected houses; and that therefore the Lord Mayor and Aldermen had ordered carts to go about with a bellman to carry away the dead bodies.” (Keys, 1944; Morris, 1903)

Defoe continues:

“it was very melancholy at first to hear so many knells going continually, so on a sudden they now observed that there was not one knell to be heard; the reason, as his new porter told him, was that the number of those that died was so great, that they had forbid the bells ringing for anybody.” (Keys, 1944; Morris, 1903)

Night after night the plague bells rung, acting as a reminder of the looming threat, frightening Londoners into following the prevention rules.

Everyday stimuli like reading the morning news, the smell of antiseptic, and a crowd gathering have now become associated with the outbreak. The long-term repercussions of such associations are not yet known, but just like combat sounds can trigger exaggerated psychophysiological responses in posttraumatic stress disorder, simple everyday sensors may become provocative triggers of a distressing time.

Most recently, in her powerful poem *The Ebola Ride*, the Liberian poet Patrice Juah faultlessly expresses in words what society has been experiencing since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent quarantines:

On the Ebola ride, paranoia is the driver.

It takes you on a high

leaving your senses hanging in the wild.

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Fear is its deputy, and panic, the conductor. (Juah, 2018)

Indeed, in a recent survey study on the psychological impact of COVID-19, responders revealed extensive emotional sequelae including symptoms of serious psychological distress and loneliness (Brooks et al., 2020).

HOPELESSNESS AND SUICIDE IDEATION

Well-established risk factors for suicide, including social isolation and a lack of social support and belonging, are exacerbated during pandemics (O’Connor and Kirtley, 2018; Pfefferbaum and North, 2020). With COVID-19, lockdown policies are increasing social isolation and decreasing the feeling of belonging in communities (Luyks et al., 2020).

There are many examples in pandemic literature where authors vividly depict suicide ideation and completion. In his fabula crepida, the Roman Seneca described in gruesome detail the horrors that accompanied the plague in Thebes:

“O dire appearance and new form of death, far heavier than death! …Prostrate the crowds lie at the altars and pray for death.” (Peiper and Richter, 1867)

This hopelessness is relevant to suicide risk now as much as it was then. Seneca’s predecessor Ovid, considered by many as the most respected Roman poet, dedicated Book VII of his masterpiece Metamorphoses to the devastating plague of the island Aegina, in which he writes of suffering:

“How I suffered during those times! Naturally, I held life in abhorrence and longed to join my friends in death.” (Gregory, 2009)

The poet also goes a step beyond suicide ideation, offering clear depictions of suicide completion:

“Survivors would have to deal with their grief, with the disruption of normal city life, and with the psychological trauma of the ordeal. Some had already gone mad with grief or killed themselves. Stories circulated of bereaved fathers trying to leap into the pit to re-join their wives and children.” (Gregory, 2009)

Similarly,

“I saw bodies cast down before the doors of the temple and, more dreadful still, before the very altars. Some hanged themselves, rushing headlong to meet their approaching doom and dispelling the fear of death by death itself.” (Gregory, 2009)

Experience of discrimination is also a risk factor for suicidality, and deplorable racism has been on the rise during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Nobel Prize laureate Thomas Mann published the novella Death in Venice, which now serves as an uncanny example of the racist discrimination directed toward individuals testing positive with COVID-19, their families, and health care workers suspected of carrying the virus (Dzau et al., 2020). In her novella Pale Horse, Pale Rider, American author Katherine Anne Porter draws inspiration from her own fight with influenza during the 1918–1919 pandemic to offer a first-hand account of the stigma experienced by infected patients. For example, when the landlady, Miss Hobbe, discovers that the protagonist is infected with the flu, she tries to evict her:

“The air trembled with the shattering scream and the hoarseellow of voices all crying together…There was her door half open, Adam standing with his hand on the knob, and Miss Hobbe with her face all out of shape with terror was crying shrilly, “I tell you, they must come for her now, or I’ll put her on the sidewalk. …I tell you, this is a plague, a plague, my God, and I’ve got a houseful of people to think about!” (Porter, 1939)

CONCLUSION

The included excerpts are only a miniscule fraction of the extensive portrayal of humanity’s experience of medical pandemics, selected because they are often overlooked and often overshadowed by the more prominent examples of the genre. The psychological devastation caused by medical crises influenced many major writers and will undoubtedly impact the writers of our generation (Wigand et al., 2020). These writings are perhaps the richest source of knowledge of humanity’s remarkable capacity to endure suffering. Our ability to prevail helps us find solace in these uncertain times. The shadowy echoes of this calamity will ripple for years to come, our whole beings transformed from our experiences. Our current actions will also reverberate. Dlugos sums this perfectly in his poem G9, named after the AIDS ward where he was treated at New York’s Roosevelt Hospital:

What we have to cherish is not only what we can recall of how things were before the plague, but how we each responded once it started

At this liminal point of the pandemic, we must comprehend that COVID-19 is and will continue to alarmingly impact our mental health, not only at the individual level but also collectively as a society. The fragility of life is apparent now more than ever. As physicians, we have the duty to recognize those most suffering, to assuage their fears, and calm their anxieties. During pandemics, life preservation should be focused not only on treating the physical ramifications of the infected but also on supporting those who are psychologically most vulnerable.

DISCLOSURE

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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