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Novel research opportunities 2: An unfortunate small silver lining to COVID-19

ABSTRACT

COVID-19 is pandemic (October 2020), opening up many research opportunities. This collection of Best Practice Guidelines (BPG) regarding COVID-19 continues in the footsteps of the previous. Two papers review population-based declines in patient hospital encounters in Malta, in general and in paediatrics. Six articles are Medical Humanities oriented. Two historical papers compare the Spanish Flu pandemic and COVID-19 in Malta, with focus on masking. The third paper reviews sports and sportsmen as role models for the COVID-19 era. Another paper reveals the significant correlation between emotional content of Facebook posts and the day-to-day COVID-19 situation in Malta. Fake news regarding COVID-19/its vaccine are reviewed along with a website designed to specifically provide accurate daily updates. Two papers deal with questionnaires that scrutinize vaccine hesitancy for influenza and COVID-19. One survey run through University of Malta Faculties of Health Sciences, Dentistry and Medicine, and the other to General Practitioners and their trainees in Malta. Another paper estimates population based costs for Malta in its preparation for COVID-19 and a paper reviews pandemic responses and outcomes of three small European island states: Cyprus, Iceland and Malta. A final paper concludes by attempting to presage the possible seasonal shape of things to come vis-à-vis seasonal influenza and COVID-19 which will co-circulate, by reviewing events in the southern hemisphere which is emerging from winter. We dedicate both BPGs to the ill and to the fallen.

1. Introduction

In October 2020, world remains in thrall to COVID-19 which has opened up many avenues of research, not only on itself, but also on other aspects of medicine and science [1]. This collection of Best Practice Guidelines (BPG) follows the first such collection and will review various aspects of COVID-19.

2. Hospital encounters

A decline in admissions, emergency visits and outpatient visits have been noted in many specialties [2-4]. Two papers analysed these drops via Malta’s only acute hospital, Mater Dei, in population based studies. One paper analyses across the board drops in all specialties vis-à-vis admissions, emergency visits and outpatients, and the second paper focuses on paediatrics, generally and by subspecialty.

3. Medical humanities and social media

Six papers in this collection are Medical Humanities oriented. Two historical papers revisit the Spanish Flu pandemic. One of these compares Malta’s response overall to this pandemic and to COVID-19, while the second paper reviews the attitudes toward face masks in Malta in both pandemics [5]. The third paper in this section takes a critical look at issues pertaining to sports and sportsmen as role models for the COVID-19 era. Another paper analyses 50,000 comments and in excess of 150,000 interactions from Facebook over the first four months of the pandemic and showed significant interactions correlations between online interaction and engagement and the COVID-19 situation in Malta during February–April 2020 [6].

4. Questionnaires

Two papers deal with questionnaires that scrutinize vaccine hesitancy [9], a phenomenon that is fueled by fake news. One survey was run through University of Malta Faculties of Health Sciences, Dentistry and Medicine, and the other to General Practitioners/Family Doctors their trainees in Malta via the Malta College of Family Doctors. Both surveys reviewed hesitancy vis-à-vis influenza vaccination and a putative novel COVID-19 vaccine.

5. General considerations

The first paper in this section is a population-based study of Malta’s expenditure in consumables and non-consumables in preparation for the COVID-19 pandemic [10]. The second paper compares and contrasts the various ways in COVID-19 was dealt with in three small European island states: Cyprus, Iceland and Malta, and the current outcomes. A final paper concludes this collection of Best Practice Guidelines by attempting to presage the possible seasonal shape of things to come vis-à-vis seasonal influenza and COVID-19, which will co-circulate. Some indication/s of what may happen this winter are available by reviewing events as they unfold in the southern hemisphere which is emerging from winter [11].

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6. Dedication

We once again conclude this collection with a dedication that may state the obvious, but one that we wish to nevertheless profess from our very hearts: the research opportunities that this pandemic has created pale to merest insignificance when compared to the morbidity and mortality that COVID-19 has directly and indirectly inflicted, and will continue to inflict, even when eventually tamed. We dedicate these collections to the ill and to the fallen.

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