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Global Spotlights

Waiting for the light at the end of the COVID-19 tunnel: best and worst moments 1 year into the pandemic

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Exactly 1 year ago, the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) suddenly made its entrance in Italy, particularly in the Po Valley, one of the most populated regions in Europe. Until 21 February 2020, when the 1st Italian patient was diagnosed, it seemed a problem far away from our continent. Over the following weeks, our professional and personal lives were turned upside down,^{1–4} and 365 days later, we are still living in a sort of *limbo* suspended between the discouraging new normal and the hope given by the light at the end of the tunnel.

Through a simple exercise ('choose the best and worst moment of the last year'), three physicians from Lombardy retrace this past *annus horribilis* balanced between dark moments and small pearls of happiness (Figure 1–4).

Dr Silvia Buzzi

Emergency Room Doctor at Papa Giovanni XXIII hospital—Bergamo, one of the biggest Italian COVID-19 hubs.

Worst moment (the last birthday of normality)—I can still remember the last normal day before the pandemic: it was 22 February 2020. I was at the birthday party of my daughter's classmate. In the evening, a message was sent in my colleagues' WhatsApp group explaining how to deal with a suspected Coronavirus case. That moment, the first of the pandemic, was my eternal worst moment that lasted for a year. I had to face challenges (not only scientific) and fight new demons: loneliness, guilt, fear, inadequacy, a constant feeling of helplessness. This pandemic has forced us to bear not only our own pain, but, more than ever, the pain of others: those who have faced the death of a loved one, unable to bid them farewell and those who could not receive that last caress. We have been many things, before being 'heroes', as we have been somewhat simplistically defined. In addition to healthcare workers, we have had to be mothers, fathers, sometimes even priests who bring that last greeting to hopeless patients dying from respiratory failure. We have also learnt to use the 'extremes' of communication: reassuring only with hands and eyes frightened patients dazed by the noise of their Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP) helmets and, conversely, giving difficult communications to equally frightened family members on the other side of the telephone without being able to reach out to them. We had to endure the silence and the din. We lived in the fear of infecting our loved ones; in my case, this forced us to make a painful decision: to separate from our daughter. As a

mother, I was steeped in guilt for months. She is a wise 5-year-old girl and was able to put it all in perspective: 'Come on, sooner or later it will end. We will defeat it'.

'Mom'—she told me while talking on the phone—'you have to get help from your friends'. She was definitely right. The support of people was crucial: a message from a friend, the hospital psychologists ready to help us understand our sense of inadequacy facing an unknown disease, the 'comfort food' prepared by our neighbours. A colleague of mine says: 'Working in the ER is like walking around in your underwear: difficult if not impossible to hide'. I am grateful I was able to share my frailties with people who are not just colleagues but true friends.

Best moment (a wordless hug)—On 13 April 2020, I finally hugged my daughter again. Without a shadow of a doubt that was my best moment. We are still here, side by side.

Dr Paolo Maggioni

General practitioner in the city of Milan, one of the most hard-hit, with 81 958 cases and 3619 deaths.⁵

Worst moment (a difficult reunion)—It was Wednesday, the 4th of March 2020, when Z., a 42-year-old barman, contacted me reporting asthenia and a dry cough. The clinical examinations were normal. At that moment, it was not possible to perform SARS-CoV-2 tests in outpatients. On Friday the 6th, I was about to leave my practice to reach my girlfriend S. and our 4-month-old daughter A. who were spending the week in a family house in the mountains, when Z. called me because of the sudden onset of dyspnoea and fall of oxygen saturation to 82%. I recommended calling an ambulance and explaining he needed hospitalization. Three molecular nasopharyngeal swabs turned out negative, but lung a computed tomography (CT) scan showed a bilateral interstitial pneumonia. The patient was released from the hospital 3 weeks later with a diagnosis of 'respiratory failure likely due to COVID-19'.

On the same night, he was hospitalized, I realised I had probably had my first contact with COVID-19. Although since the beginning of that week I had been wearing FFP3 masks I had found in a building supply shop, as the local health authority did not provide any, I was afraid of exposing my family to the virus.

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A year of pandemic as a primary care physician

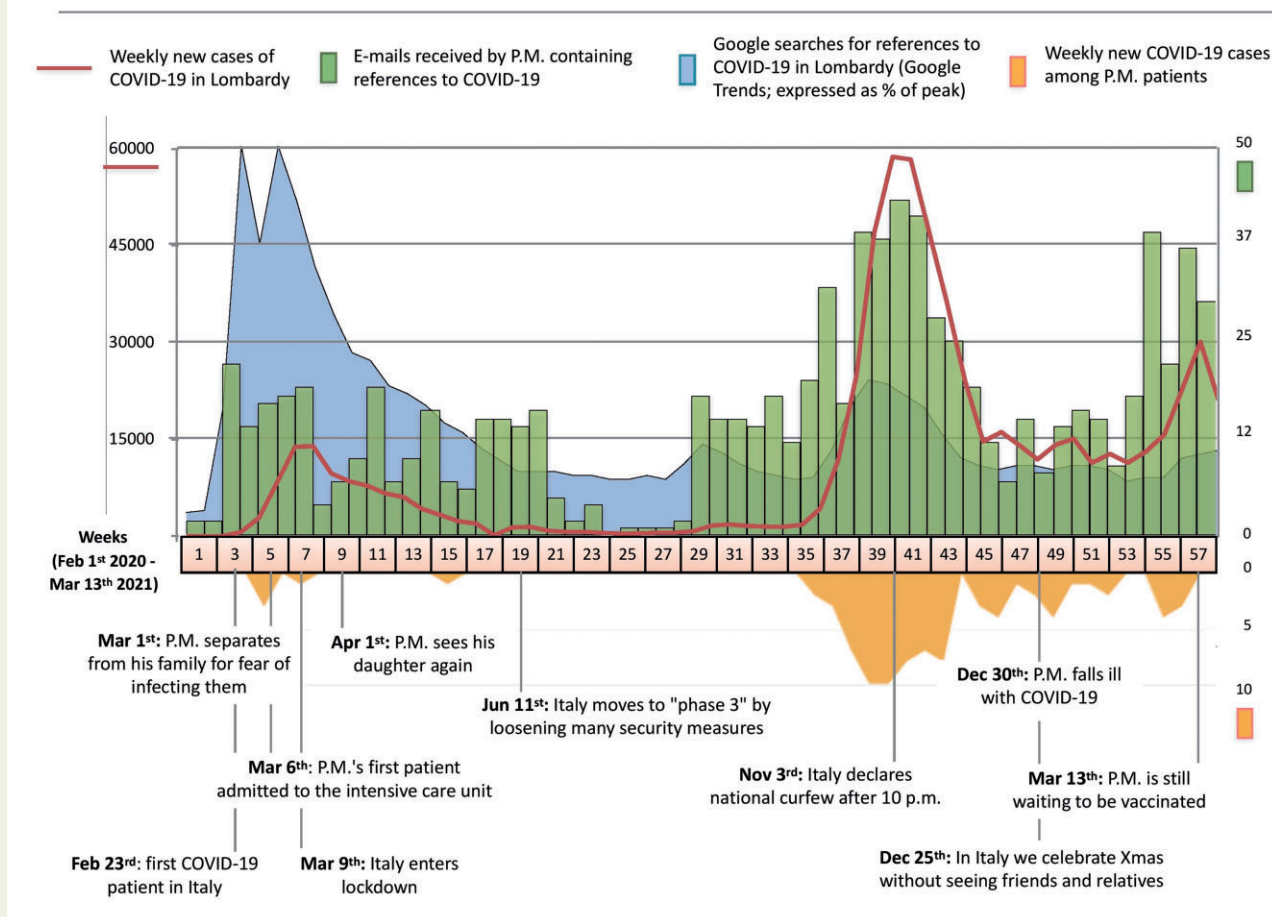


Figure 1 A year of pandemic as a primary care physician. In the weeks after February 2020, in the Lombardy region, the curve of infections (red line) has undergone peaks and troughs. Searches for terms related to Coronavirus disease 2019 on search engines (blue line) and emails sent by patients to P.M.'s account with the same terms (green rectangles) followed a similar trend. The lower part of the figure shows weekly new Coronavirus disease 2019 cases among P.M.'s patients (orange rectangles), the events in P.M.'s personal and professional life, and the main stages of the epidemic in Italy. COVID-19, Coronavirus disease 2019; P.M., Paolo Maggioni.

After a few dramatic days following the identification of the Italian index case (8th of March), a national lockdown was imposed. That was the first of 8 weeks I spent without my family.

I felt completely alone: alone trying to explain the situation to hundreds of patients scared by the rising number of deaths, alone when visiting at home patients with typical COVID-19 symptoms without guidelines, alone supporting a cancer patient when his department was suddenly closed, alone in buying and learning how to use protective equipment. I was alone even when I returned home, where I was only able to see the ones I love through a phone screen.

However, the worst moment of my last year was when S. came to Milan with A. on the 1st of April. As we were wearing masks, the first thing I noticed was the intense eye contact between me and S., suddenly interrupted by A. crying when she saw me.

She did not recognize me, she did not want me to hold her, and she did not stop crying until they left. I had waited for that moment for a month, and I did not even have the chance to talk. It was really hard for me to rebuild a relationship with my daughter: we were separated for 2 months in the early stages of her growth.

Best moment (it is finally over)—After touching the peak of the 'second wave', new COVID-19 cases were under control by December.

On the 23rd of December, I only had one COVID-19 case: an 89-year-old man, whom I was seeing at home. He was the last patient I saw before moving to our mountain house for a week, as restrictions allowed us to stay in a second home.

As the 29th of December started as a sunny day, I put A. in the child carrier backpack and went out hiking. Back home, I started having chills and coughing, but I thought, and somehow hoped, it was related to sweating in the snow with 10 kg of tenderness on my shoulders. During the night, spent in a separate bedroom, the dry cough got worse, I felt feverish and nervous.

I suddenly checked my oxygen saturation (97%), and I experienced the anxiety I saw in the eyes of my patients. I was only having very common flu-like symptoms, and even if I am a 36-year-old healthy person, the unpredictable evolution of the disease, together with what I had experienced in the last year, made it easy to lose focus. The fever went up to 38°C, I had a constant headache and I isolated myself as much as possible.

After 4 days, I felt better (although anosmic!) when leaving for the hospital for the test. I fell asleep on the sofa early in the evening, and I was woken up by an SMS that notified me with the test result: positive.

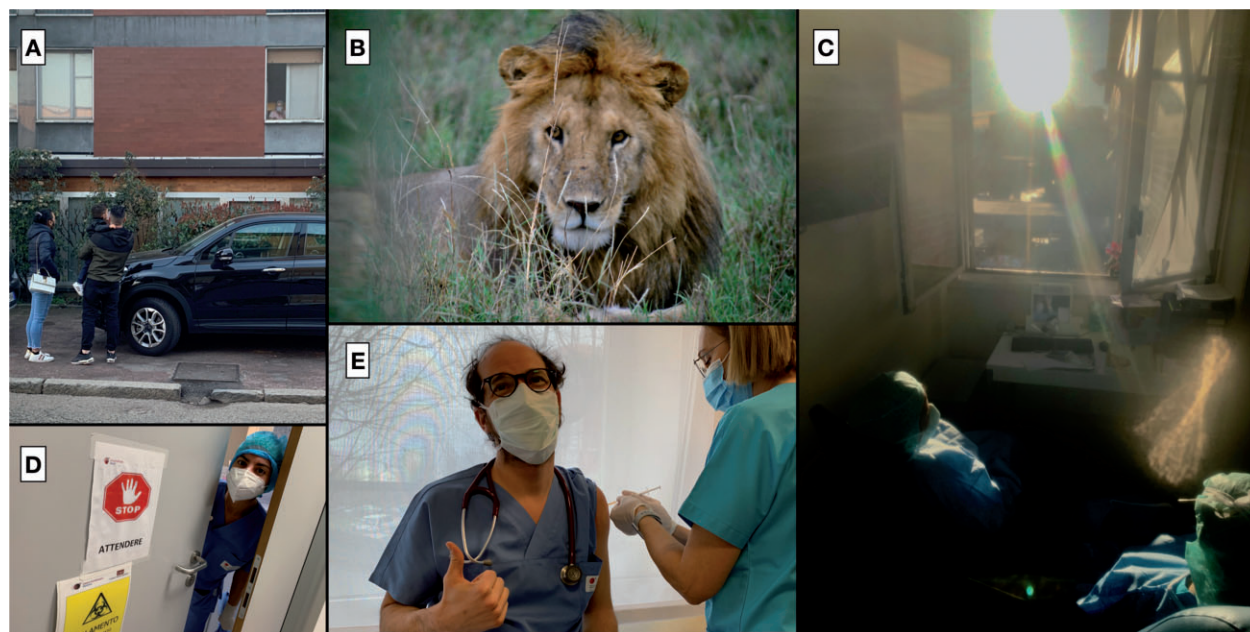


Figure 2 One year in pictures. (A) From the street in front of the ward, a family greets their hospitalized grandmother as they talk to her on the phone. In this year, hospitals have been forced to suspend inpatient visits. (B) During the pandemic, in our Country, Coronavirus disease 2019 acted like a lion on the prowl. After long months of silence, it has returned to hunt mercilessly with each wave. (C) This is (not) the light at the end of the tunnel. Shift-weary nurses enjoy an unexpected sunny day in late November. Even through protective gear, the sun's rays manage to provide some warmth. (D) With each wave of infection, our hospital has opened an entire wing to admit Coronavirus disease 2019 patients. Inside, cardiologists from across the hospital have dedicated themselves to patients in respiratory failure, accumulating shift after shift of physical and psychological fatigue. (E) M.M.'s proudest moment in February 2021, when he received his 2nd dose of the vaccine. In Italy, many health workers took pictures of themselves during the vaccination to spread them on social networks and raise awareness of its importance among the general population. M.M., Massimo Mapelli.

Having the confirmation, I had COVID-19 when symptoms were almost over was somehow liberating. I moved to the bedroom with the only fear of having infected S. and A.

The next morning, S. told me that they had both woken up with flu-like symptoms. The fever, in particular for A., rose up to 39°C. Systemic symptoms disappeared after 3 days, when S. started having anosmia and dysgeusia.

Even though in the beginning, I was sorry for bringing home SARS-CoV-2, as we recovered from the disease, I felt good: we were lucky after all, we recovered quickly, and we could face the near future, waiting for the vaccination, with less fear.

Dr Massimo Mapelli

Cardiologist at Centro Cardiologico Monzino, IRCCS in Milan, a tertiary referral centre for cardiovascular diseases that disrupted its operations to deal with the emergency.⁶

Best moment (Injected!)—This past 5 February, at 10:20 a.m., I received my second dose of the BNT162b2 mRNA COVID-19 vaccine, commonly known as the 'Pfizer vaccine'. That was without a doubt the best moment of the last year. Despite the winter season, it was sunny outside, and we could glimpse in the distance snow-capped mountain peaks. During the Christmas holidays, we had been notified of the start of the vaccination campaign. Over the next few weeks, all medical staff members were vaccinated with a (voluntary) adherence over 90%.

I will never again see so many people happy to see a needle pricking their deltoid. Even the mild side effects experienced by a few colleagues over the following days were welcomed with no worries. I can see myself on that morning, waiting in line, the nurse smiling at me. This is probably her

100th vaccine, but I feel like the main character of a Hollywood movie as I take the last steps into the room, hearing a solemn soundtrack in the background. She rubs my arm with antiseptic and injects me like a hummingbird. Then she covers it with a plaster, telling me something I cannot hear because of the loud music. I suddenly felt lighter. I knew precisely the nightmare was not over, but that day I won a small battle of my own.

Until most of us have been immunized, life will not return to what it used to be. I felt privileged and a little guilty. I had experienced a similar feeling during the first pandemic wave, when we health workers used to skip the line at the supermarket. But that night I did not want to leave room for sad thoughts, I kissed my son goodnight and, when I closed my eyes, I fell into a sleep without nightmares.

Worst moment (Déjà vu)—The worst moment of the year occurred a week later, when in the middle of my department I saw a few antelopes running. I have had the opportunity to work in a large non-profit hospital in Uganda. It would happen on the weekend to take a jeep and go for a ride in the nearby nature reserve. When you go on safari, you do not know if you will have a chance to see the lion. It is no use looking around trying to spot him on the horizon. It took nature thousands of years to make it that exact colour, perfect for blending in with the brown of the grass. Indirect signals are more useful: when the antelopes start running away, then the lion is coming. It was early morning when the first antelopes peeped into that corner that had been designated as 'COVID-19 area'. They opened the fire door with the yellow 'isolation' sign, which had been closed for a few weeks now, marking the end of the second wave. They set up the equipment, reattached the monitors, and checked for the presence of an adequate number of gloves, masks, and protective visors. Late in the



Figure 3 Being parents and physicians during the Coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. (A) 'Mom and Dad, you are my favourite superheroes because you help all people'. A friend of S.B.'s daughter drew a picture for her and her husband, T., also a doctor on the front lines of the fight against Coronavirus disease 2019. (B) P.M. was separated from his family for a long time during the 1st Italian lockdown, a very hard period faced in complete solitude. (C) Rush hour in the street of P.M.'s clinic. During the spring of 2020, even Milan, a major international metropolis, looked like a ghost town. P.M., Paolo Maggioni; S.B., Silvia Buzzi.



Figure 4 In addition to being physicians engaged in the battle against COVID-19 in Lombardy, the authors are longtime friends and former high school classmates.

afternoon, the 'lion' arrived: the first COVID-19 patient of the 'third wave' came up lying on a stretcher wrapped in a plastic cover to prevent contagion. Admission diagnosis: 'syncope in severe aortic stenosis. Positive SARS-CoV-2 test'. Exactly 1 year after those first European cases, appeared in an outbreak a few kilometres away from here, here we go all over again. I feel part of an eternal, unpleasant, surreal déjà vu. We are back to the start, as in an endless Game of the Goose. From here, the light at the end of the tunnel still looks far away.

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