**Death in the Time of COVID-19**

*Dr Vivek Joseph Varughese, Dr Aju Mathew*

Recently, Madras High Court ordered a reburial of Dr Simon Hercules, who died in April 2020 due to COVID-19 related illness, caused by the SARS-CoV2 virus. Dr Simon was a 55 year old neurosurgeon, who started a community hospital to provide quality care at affordable costs. Not surprisingly, he contracted the infection from a patient who needed emergent surgical care. His patients and co-workers remember a generous and hardworking doctor who epitomized the best of humanity. But in his death, Dr Simon was inhumanely denied dignity. A mob of people, spurred by rumor that a death body can spread infection, stopped the family and friends of Dr Simon on their way to a cemetery. His friends had to wait for hours and dig the grave themselves. The good doctor was buried like a criminal. His family was unable to bid him a farewell or conduct religious rites. The judge, who ordered the reburial, stated that the events that followed the doctor’s death were shockingly inhumane.

Dr Simon died a year ago. The World was ‘locked down’ due to the pandemic. Governments, scientists, doctors and policymakers were clueless on how to manage the unprecedented global crisis. Healthcare systems were found to be grossly unprepared to handle the large numbers of persons who were falling sick. Citizens were thrown into a pandemonium filled with rumors, fake news, fear and peril. We knew nothing about the new corona virus. How did it spread? Can it survive in the environment outside of a human host, and if so, for how long? We simply could not tackle an enemy we hardly understood.

Not surprisingly, the health authorities took a decision to assume that the bodies of persons who die from COVID19 were contagious. On March 24, 2020, the World Health Organization issued guidance regarding infection control practices for the safe management of a dead body in the context of the pandemic. There was no evidence of persons getting infected from exposure to the bodies of persons who died from SARS-CoV2 infection. The WHO clearly stated that except in cases of hemorrhagic fevers such as Ebola and Marburg fever, and diseases like cholera, dead bodies are not considered as infectious. People who died from COVID-19 could be cremated or buried. Disinfection of the body was not recommended, and body bags were not routinely recommended. The WHO recommended not touch the body. It was advised to seal body orifices to prevent leakage of fluids. Immunosuppressed persons above sixty years of age and children were advised to not be in direct contact with the body.

It is a sad testament to the state of our public health management that despite the guidance from the WHO, Dr Simon’s family was subjected to the avoidable mental trauma.

In September 2020, the WHO released an updated guidance emphasizing that bodies could be cremated or buried. The expert body requested local authorities not to devalue the dignity of the dead, and urged them to respect the religious and cultural practices prevailing in a society.  Likewise, India’s health ministry permitted the handing over of dead bodies to the family and for last rites to be performed based on their practices. The final decision was left to the local governing bodies. Therein lay the grave mistake.

In cultures and religions practiced all over the world, there are specific rituals and prayers associated with funerals. These may be in accordance with a religious doctrine or a cultural custom. These practices yield a sense of hope and purpose to the loved ones of the dead. Despite having no scientific basis, these customs and practices are pivotal factors in the emotional realm of human civilizations that can never be belittled. The emotional turmoil of the grieving family and friends can have long standing repercussions, beyond logical compensations or rational reimbursements as suggested by the honorable judge in the case of Dr Simon’s reburial.

The only defense for common cremation and dismissal of religious rituals could be that these ceremonies would lead to a gathering, with no assurance for social distancing to be followed. But the fact is that the same crowd feared to form at a funeral place of choice, is in fact forming at the common crematorium also. Unless the virus has a selective affinity to spread at a place of religious choice, this defense also turns out to be illogical and hollow.

The unfortunate death of Dr. Simon was a year ago. Now we know a lot more about the virus and its methods. Vaccinations are placing a final check on the pandemic. Two guidelines from the WHO clarified the fact that dead bodies of persons who died of COVID-19 related complications are not to be considered as contagious. There is no evidence for the transmission of the disease from dead to the living has ever been reported. Still, little has changed on the ground.

Recently, a 93 year-old gentleman known to one of us, who died due to complications related to COVID-19, was cremated at a common crematorium, devoid of the kind of rituals the family would have liked to practice. His body was covered in a body bag, and only his face shown to the family. After cremation, the ashes were given to the family to be buried at their place of choice. Frivolous acts such as these yield nothing but irreparable damage to the dignity of the dead. These are just two among many cases where the right to dignity of the dead was forsaken.  It's high time that we bust the myths associated with the virus, and make sure such unscientific, irrational, illogic, and uncivilized practices come to an end.