

Out Cry: In the Middle of a Pandemic - Human Decency is What We Demand

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Received: June 26, 2020; **Published:** July 08, 2020

As public health professionals, we have been at the forefront of the COVID-19 crisis - trying to find solutions in the absence of a cure (drug) or a prophylactic (vaccine) against the SARS-CoV-2. As we remember the passing of the all-time greatest champ Mohammed Ali, four years ago, what he said becomes more important now than ever. "Service to humanity is the rent you pay on this earth". Throughout our career in the public health workforce, we have tried to follow this principle and have urged others to do the same.

This is not new. We have seen and worked on SARS, MERS-CoV, the 2009 influenza H1N1 pandemic, and know that viruses do not observe borders. Since January 2010, a few, including us have been advocating preparedness, but our voices were not heard. A disease that was supposed to stay in Wuhan, China according to some experts, circumvented the world resulting in a pandemic causing disease in over 9.6 million and claiming close to 490,000 lives [1]. Please remember the deaths are not a number - these are humans who succumbed to the disease and had families. The disease is exploding in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East - with close to 100,000 cases being reported per day [2]. The global data suggests that the daily number of cases is increasing, but the daily number of deaths is declining; the probable reason is lack of appropriate reporting.

With cases in the US spiking after the easing of lockdown and over 40,000 new cases, the highest total, reported on June 25; it is projected that the US will most likely exceed the 2.6 million confirmed case mark and reach close to 130,000 deaths by the end of June. With a 14.7% unemployment rate, the highest since the Great Depression, public anxiety was at an all-time high as well [3]. As a result, most states opened up and relaxed their policies.

The virus is still here.

Opening safely and returning to normalcy will rely entirely on the widespread availability of reliable and nation-wide testing to detect infectious individuals. Moreover, two components to make this a success are tracking and contact tracing with a specific focus on vulnerable populations, the elderly, ones residing at long-term care facilities and/or with chronic diseases. Apart from this, the most useful measure the population has at their disposal is social distancing, masking, and hand hygiene.

As the nation was ramping up the capability and capacity of testing, tracking, and tracing, in the aftermath of the health and economic crisis due to COVID-19, an insurmountable tragedy was inflicted by the unnecessary and brutal death of Mr. George Floyd. This was not the first time that the nation experienced such an atrocity, but this event has now been seen in its entirety by the nation, as it was recorded, and has resulted in civic unrest that is unprecedented. In fact, it has become an international outcry. The masses have united in peaceful protest, but the anger has unfortunately resulted in some looting and violence.

Our job as a public health professionals and epidemiologists is to find solutions and to find a way to save lives and the question that we have been asked above all is how are the protests going to bring a resurgence in cases and additional deaths in the absence of a cure or a prophylactic? And do we have all the measures such as testing, tracking, and tracing in place?

Before we talk about the resurgence due to the protest marches, we have to realize that the number of cases in some states such as Texas and California were already on the rise. Moreover, there is a higher mortality rate among the African American, Latino and Native American populations. Equipped with this knowledge when we look at sixty-thousand people packed into downtown Houston on a march to City Hall, we get very concerned. In these marches and protests, people are raising their voices in enthusiasm and not everyone is wearing a mask - resulting in the release of the virus in the surrounding environment. So, are there be more cases - YES, but it was not immediate, the incubation period for COVID-19 on average is between four and seven days. Now we realize that the case count and mortality have been affected by these protests and with the premature relaxing of restrictions.

Are the other measures such as testing, tracing, and tracking in place? NOT entirely. The nation is still in the process of implementing these measures. Should the people who have participated or are or planning to participate in the protests be tested? - YES.

Coming back to remembering the legacy of Mohammed Ali, we wonder what his message would be today with nation-wide protests and stand-offs between the protesters and law-enforcement agencies. In a time where citizens, knowing the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, are risking their lives for civic equality and justice. We are confident that he would be very vocal and angry at how Mr. George Floyd lost his life however; we believe his message would also focus on demanding peaceful demonstrations and he would encourage all races and people from all walks of life to be "United" against racism and for "Justice".

What we have learned is that racism is a bigger and more devastating disease then coronavirus itself as it passes through generation after generation and that this cycle has to stop. It is truly unfortunate that we are seeing what we never expected to see in the country that we adopted, a country we love and admire so much, a country that is the beacon of freedom and human rights. We are truly heartbroken and this is our outcry as we cannot find a vaccine or a drug to stop this.

Let's all think what Mohammed Ali said and serve humanity - what we all strive for is basic human decency. This can be achieved by reforms and strictly mandating them; the responsibility falls on our elected officials - the nation cannot wait anymore. Let's make sure that the basic human decency is provided to the citizens of the nation which cannot be racially biased. Protesting against racism and injustice is our constitutional right but let's make sure that this is done in a safe way - we cannot afford the resurgence of COVID-19. Although we know social distancing is not possible, please wear a mask, use hand hygiene and above all avoid looting and violence. Remember, not all law enforcement individuals are racist and not all protestors violent. There is good among all - we just have to reach inside and bring it out. All humans are created equal in the eyes of God and thus must be treated equally by humans. We are together in this and together we can cleanse our minds and hearts of racism and hatred - we have to be forcefully but peacefully, taking all the required health precautions, to make sure that our voices are heard.

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Volume 16 Issue 8 August 2020

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