

Learning from the pandemic - and not repeating the mistakes made

The COVID-19 pandemic has generated a profound appreciation of, and respect for, health workers in the minds of all Brazilians.

In the midst of an unprecedented avalanche of misinformation, our more than 4 million health professionals – 3.5 million of whom are directly linked to the Unified Health System (SUS) – formed a veritable barrier to protect life against neglect and denialism. And the articles in this journal show that they are among those who suffered the most in the years of the pandemic.

Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, physiotherapists, and many other professionals dealt with a huge volume of patients to attend – often without the infrastructure of beds and equipment needed to care for the patients. And without the necessary safety equipment to protect their own health.

Community health agents, ambulance drivers, cleaning, security or kitchen professionals in health units shared the same strenuous workload, the same risks, and an equally fundamental role in protecting lives.

In common with all these people, there is exhaustion, tension and the certainty that, sooner or later, they could be infected – and many of them did, in fact, succumb to the disease. There is also the physical and psychological strain, as well as the sadness at the loss of colleagues.

As if that were not enough, there is also the disrespect of the hate speech posted on the Internet against those who defended science, rather than against obscure political objectives. And a condition that is perhaps even more painful: the fear of bringing the virus into their homes. The pain of not being able to give a hug and show affection to their children, parents or loved ones.

What all health workers went through during the pandemic must never be forgotten. It needs to be studied and lessons learnt. Above all, it needs to serve as a lesson such that our public policies are improved, and situations such as those faced precisely by those who save lives, are never repeated.

The truth is that Brazil has all the necessary conditions to achieve this. The SUS is a democratic achievement and an example to the world, whether due to its gigantic size, its federative structure, or its capacity to provide care. Our health regulation, like our labor regulation, is solid and efficient. And we have a strong and organized civil society, capable of defending the rights of professional categories.

We also have the benefit of science. With male and female researchers generating and recording knowledge, such as that contained in this journal. Knowledge that will help us know what to do to ensure that everyone – including professionals in the field – can exercise their right to health.

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