

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

COVID-19 and its danger of distraction

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COVID-19 is a rapidly evolving global pandemic. With an increasing numbers of cases, the governments and healthcare institutions across the world have geared up to combat it. As the number of patients attending the emergency department (ED) with suspected or positive COVID-19 surge, our services and workflows are now focused on managing them appropriately. There are multiple reports suggesting that the total daily ED attendance has declined.^{1,2,3} This decrease may be due to less patients coming to the ED for various acute to sub-acute medical conditions, but the worrisome trend may be the decreasing numbers of patients with true medical emergencies e.g., acute coronary syndrome, acute stroke, etc. Another worry is the delay in seeking treatment for life-threatening conditions like ST-elevation myocardial infarction (STEMI) which may eventually lead to increased morbidity and mortality.⁴

This crisis has also caused unprecedented disruption to healthcare delivery. As emergency physicians, we need to be mindful of the fact that as the number of COVID-19 cases surge, we should not get distracted from our primary focus of managing all critical emergencies. The non-COVID related emergencies don't stop occurring in the general population. The threat of COVID-19 is causing patients not to seek help for true medical emergencies. They are fearful of being exposed to COVID-19; and thus avoiding hospitals. Strict lockdown measures and social distancing protocols have led to cancellation of elective procedures. Patients sometimes avoid filling their prescriptions due to fear of going to doctors for timely review, or sometimes due to financial reasons. There is also a noted rise in acute psychiatric illnesses, especially as the economy worsens, people are restricted inside their homes during lockdown, or due to lay-off from their jobs.⁵ Thus, there is a potential for worsening of the patient's underlying condition during this time, especially when the duration of return to normalcy is still being debated. This equates to putting their lives at risk.

As emergency physicians and the healthcare sector as a whole, we cannot be distracted and narrow down our focus only on this current COVID-19 outbreak. Our policies and protocols should strive to achieve a balance between the management of COVID-19 cases, as well as ensure timely availability of emergency services to other critical emergencies as well. Along with pandemic workflows, we should also ascertain that patients presenting to the ED with critical emergencies like acute coronary syndrome, acute stroke, sepsis, cancer, renal dialysis are attended to immediately, with safeguards to keep the patients as well as the healthcare staff safe. Along with the threat posed by the ongoing pandemic, we should take this opportunity to put a spotlight on the threats posed by the other medical emergencies, and ensure continuity of timely and appropriate care for all our patients.

Emergency physicians are in a unique position to connect to a wide patient population that is directly impacted by COVID-19, compared to other medical specialties that do not manage a similar volume of patients. They can employ interventions to educate and reassure the public that the EDs and hospitals have adequate safeguards in place to ensure their safety. They can compile various resources for patients and their families, or hold media briefings regarding COVID-19 education, correct misconceptions, and highlight to them that emergency services are still accessible for all medical emergencies during the pandemic, not just those related to COVID-19. Multidisciplinary healthcare providers can collaborate and arrange online sessions to update the community regarding the evolution of the pandemic, as well as emphasize to the people that failing to seek timely and emergent help for any medical emergency can result in increased severity of illness upon arrival to

the ED. This can lead to a higher incidence of them requiring high dependency or intensive care, and even catastrophic consequences of death, which could potentially have been avoided. The public should be advised to attend the emergency department if they feel that their condition is deteriorating from the baseline, and not to delay access to care.

Thus, emergency departments, and the brave hearted healthcare staff of the EDs and hospitals have a very important role to play in providing care for all life-threatening emergencies, and not getting distracted due to the pandemic. This is the time that the emergency physicians should ensure that there are protocols in place to provide timely care for COVID-19 related as well as all other critical emergencies. They should also go beyond their normal scope of work to educate the public and allay their fear and concerns, and assure them that they still have access to high-quality, multidisciplinary care for any medical emergency.

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Author contribution

SP conceived the idea for the manuscript and also contributed to the writing and editing

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