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Letter to the Editor

"I have beard permission for all the patients!"

Dear Sir,

Re: Cultural sensitivity during a time of great stress in critically ill patients.

We work in a large medical center in the Middle East and like most countries in the world have just experienced a wave of critically ill patients presenting to our intensive care with respiratory failure due to Covid 19. Besides learning to deal with many more patients than usual and a new disease process in which the knowledge base is dynamic and evolving, we have also had to learn to deal with some unusual circumstances with regard to the environment and the patient population.

Patients are in strict quarantine and not allowed visitors. The only contact is a daily telephone call by the attending physician to a family member to update them about the patient's condition. One of the matters that we have been forced to discuss with the families is the matter of the patients' beards. This is perhaps not a matter that requires much discussion in most other countries, but is a matter of great sensitivity in our country.

Leviticus 19:27 states, "You shall not round off the side-growth on your head, or destroy the side-growth of your beard." Religious Jews interpret this to not allow shaving of the beard, particularly with a razor blade. Our problem is that a large proportion of our Covid 19 patients are religious Jewish males, with full beards and moustaches. The facial hair greatly interferes with routine care in the ICU, such as fixation of the endotracheal tube, proper mouth care, placing of central lines and tracheostomy. Consequently, with support from the rabbis and with an undertaking to trim as little hair as possible, using an electric shaver and not a razor, we had to approach all the families during the daily telephone call for their permission to shave the beards of our patients.

It was in light of the above, and having obtained permission for the last beard to be shaved that the attending physician declared "I have beard permission for all the patients!" It's only a small matter and may be of no consequence in another country or another circumstance, but it is very important to our patients and we are careful to attend to this culturally-sensitive matter, even at a time of great stress.

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Sincerely,
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