

Downtime to Dreamtime

A usual day in the life of a doctor. Early morning rush to get to the hospital in time. Every person at home scampering from one room to the other. Each one having their own demands, needs, and urgencies. Switch places – at the hospital, from finding a suitable parking to planning your talk today... innumerable thoughts rush through the mind. It is a race! A race against time....against tasks at hand.... against diminishing deadlines to complete a job. The rush hour of outpatient department (OPD), the never-ending demands of patients, staff, and management. Tempers on a high, patience hanging by a thin thread, lack of adequate time for counseling patients, leave aside hobbies or activities of pleasure. Added to this hectic life declining respect to doctors in the community, the need to find a balance between evidence-based medicine and practical solutions to routine issues in medicine – the life of a doctor is quite demanding.

Slow down. Pause. Stop. Life takes a complete turn. A new wave of global threat now reaches the confines of the country, state, city, and immediate surroundings. Drastic measures of containment force people to stay at home. New demands on health-care services take a toll on regular working. Infrastructure changes; expansions of the existing framework; redistribution of beds, equipment, and staff; and the ever-evolving protocols give a new dimension to daily work. The rush hour on roads is absent, the available parking is abundant, OPD load is diminishing to minimum, and suddenly the future appears uncertain. There will be sunshine, yes, but the period till then looks hazy. Not gloomy, but unclear. As the imminent effect of the threat draws closer, each activity appears intimidating. Covered faces, protective equipment at workplace, distancing even while buying groceries, shutting down of schools and colleges, and abundant messages of hand wash and cough or sneeze hygiene, precipitously transform the “routines.” Days at length spent at home with family members. The locked-up board games are out, ties with long-lost friends are renewed, and innovative games and activities with children at home are refreshing. Is this the “New Normal?” Are we seeing a renewed mechanism at workplace, malls, schools, offices, and homes?

A possible Yes! At every level, we shall be seeing transformations. Let's start from the workplace. Leaving aside the essential services such as health care and banking, majority of the sectors will see reduced number of staff at work. Varying percentages of workforce is going to “Work from Home.” There will be attempts by industries/workplaces to have employee accommodations nearby to avoid disruptions during lockdowns. This has numerous ramifications. The vehicle density on the overcrowded

roads will see a fall. The pollution parameters on the signboard (Alarming PM2.5 and PM10 levels!) might show a pleasant figure. Job searches may be restricted to the city or country of residence. Immigration numbers are likely to see a dip.

At the hospitals, use of mask and handwashing practices is going to be permanent, which is good for the system. Crowd management will be a different perspective – adequate distancing between patients, caregivers, support staff, and health-care professionals will be needed. In fact, a conscious enterprise toward social distancing in the community at large will be the norm in future. There is a perceptible reduction in deaths due to road traffic accidents and in exacerbations of pollution-related health problems. Will the governing agencies enforce regular lockdowns of such nature, albeit short ones, in future? It may well be a valid solution. How about the safety practices during interventional procedures – surgeries/endoscopies etc.? Personal protective equipment will eventually become the norm. Much of the observations during this period will probably lead to renewed approaches with respect to management guidelines, etc. The endeavors of the government will be to enhance the budget and increased spending on public health care, which will be a welcome step. There will be deliberate planning for better preparedness toward such future pandemics and health-related emergencies. The drive to support the pharma industry toward affordable medication, subsidy on life-saving drugs, as well as the thrust in improving the infrastructure for research and vaccine development are very much likely. There is the much-perceived inadequacy of available and adequate personal protection equipment in the current pandemic. In the advent of biological warfare as a reality, enhanced vigilance as well efforts for adequate and effective mass protective measures will be a challenge.

The industrial sector is also going to witness a change. There is likely to be more emphasis on indigenous manufacturing and export. Strategies to prevent supply chain disruptions will become a priority at each industry and sector level. Travel and tourism will be a challenge too. It is going to be more taxing with the added general health checkups at the airports and maybe railway stations. International travel will require more stringent documentation, such as vaccination or infection-free certificates, at the host country and the destination. Quarantine thresholds will be at an all time low. Repatriation rates might rise.

Meetings will also witness new dimensions. The webinars and teleconferencing resorted to during the lockdown state

will improve the feasibility of holding them more regularly and more efficiently. The overall effect of this will lead to reduced travel from the place of work and ability to attend a meeting at any time of the day. An offshoot of this will be crisp and incisive durations of meetings and discussions.

Another aspect of life which has been acknowledged and appreciated is the overall gratitude. Be it in any aspect – good health, sustainable means of living, personal relations, and emotional and financial safety, gratitude is perceptible in the environment. There has been renewed effort by people to thank their near and dear and neighbors and thank strangers going about doing their tasks. People are realizing that their requirements are, indeed, over inflated. They can manage within the means available. There is patience in lines at marketplaces, banks, etc.,. This gratitude will have an overall bearing on the society. Family ties, bonding, and values will rejuvenate lives.

There will be palpable changes with respect to the fellow human being, especially a renewed respect for the workforce in the service sector, especially health care and police. We are better aware of what constitutes essential service. Sacrifices of health-care professionals will not be forgotten. It is now imperative on the health-care staff to seize this opportunity and relook at the essential soft skills while dealing with the sick and their attendants. Period-to-period comparison, then, will definitely show a decline in the disturbing trends of assault on the health-care staff.

Nature and its resources are likely to be more understood and cared for. Man is learning, if not already learned, that meddling with nature will lead to his own peril. More attention will be provided to avoid ecological disturbances. The drives for greenery, clean skies, fresh air, and wildlife preservation will see a new revival. There is likely to be realignment of the world's resources for better tackling such emergencies in future. Time to look inward and onward.

Is it all nice and sunny hereafter? May not be entirely. Creation of job opportunities will be a practical challenge, at the government and at the sector level. The economy will need focused attention. Liquidity is an issue which will affect the common man, and there must be a concerted effort to

make available cash for the businesses to run and demands to be met. It is a vicious circle. Slack in business reduces supply, while reduced liquidity reduces demand, which further reduces supply. The economy will eventually recover, but the timeline is speculative. There may well be short-term scarcity of food grains, vegetables, and fruits due to the ripple effects of the prolonged lockdowns, unless due preventive measures are taken. The constant stress of COVID-19 and its complications is likely to cause emotional burden in people, needing attention in the due course of time.

Life has changed. And will continue to change. For, after every pandemic or famine that affects humankind, the people give in their best for a good future. Time to innovate, reinvent, rise, and grow. This is an opportunity, to turn the “Downtime” to “Dreamtime!”

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