EDITORIAL

Heroes of our time

As I sit to write this editorial, it is May 26, 2020, and we are still in the midst of our struggles with the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. As of 5 pm today, Ontario posted its lowest new case count (320), which is an encouraging trend; but we are not 'out of the woods' yet. Our Ontario totals are now 27,809 confirmed or pending cases, which includes 2,218 deaths.

I am not certain when you will read my brief comments and it is difficult to predict what the situation will be at that time. Although there is still much uncertainty, I trust an end to this scourge will be in sight. Our world history records show there have been epidemics and plagues striking the human race throughout the course of time ranging from the Black Death in Europe in the 14th century to the recent SARS outbreak of 2002-2004; I take heart in that there has been an end to them.

But in the meantime, COVID-19 has changed our world. In some instances, things may never go back to the way they were. We are living through unprecedented times, undergoing experiences we have never seen before in our lives and challenges we could hardly have imagined a few short months ago. I would venture to say that none of us have remained untouched.

Our cancer world is no exception to being changed. Labs are closed, surgeries are not being done, appointments are being delayed or postponed, and chemotherapy and radiation are being delayed. Clearly, there are urgent and significant challenges regarding how to deliver cancer care safely.

Staff are working frequently from home and interacting with patients over the phone or web-based programs. Healthcare providers are often exhausted, living with loss and grief, and fearing for themselves, as well as their families.

Individuals with cancer are also concerned. COVID-19 has created a host of challenges for them, as well. They worry that their disease has spread while they wait for diagnosis or treatment, they fear being at higher risk by going to a healthcare facility, and they worry about being a low priority and abandoned by their cancer care team. Some have been unemployed overnight and face significant financial challenge. Many cannot bring another individual with them to a clinic or treatment appointment for support. Others are dying alone, unable to have family members close to them.

Yet, in the midst of this hardship and challenge, there are heroes working every day. Oncology nurses are there, doing what they do best. They are caring and supporting individuals and family members to the best of their abilities. They are building on the strengths they see and the relationships that matter. They are finding ways to help patients through this incredible time of uncertainty. And they are supporting one another on the front lines.

I have heard about nurses having to find new ways to deliver care and support to patients through digital avenues. This can mean having to learn new skills and work in different ways—all in a time of stress and anxiety. Sometimes the new ways are having to be organized quickly and do not seem ideal, but there is a need to focus on pragmatism and using what is available. Yet sometimes with crisis comes significant development.

I have heard some wonderful stories about how digital approaches have opened doors and extended reach of providers to new populations or individuals who would not have been engaged previously—a woman who is hard of hearing and cannot attend an in-person support group manages very nicely, as she can turn the volume up on the computer; a bedbound individual with advanced disease who cannot travel to participate in a group able to do so from her bed; rural and remote dwelling cancer patients connecting frequently and easily with healthcare providers when they were unable to do so in the past. Clearly there are lessons for us to learn and apply in the future.

There can be rays of hope amidst the dark times... like the sun coming through the clouds after a thunderstorm. Although we cannot let our guard down, we can know we are in this together. We are not alone. We have one another and can be stronger together.

I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the dedication, selflessness, and leadership of oncology nurses who are providing care and comfort to individuals with cancer and their families. Thank you for who you are and what you are doing to guide patients through their experience with cancer in this time of pandemic.

You are the heroes of our time.

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