

From Pandemic to World Instability and War Crimes: Lessons Learned in a Turbulent Socio-Political Landscape

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a transformative event in our lives, impacting every aspect of society. Corradi and Ranzieri provides an overview of articles published in our journal to deal with the multifaceted nature of this new disease. [1] They also suggest that COVID-19 has been a trigger further accelerating the change of paradigm of Occupational Medicine, which is more and more concerned with prevention, contributing to health promotion and Total Worker Health®. [1] Such an unprecedented crisis has also taught us valuable lessons that should guide us as we face similar challenges in the future. Two articles published in this issue provide an overview of the lessons learned during the first four years of living with SARS-CoV-2, which should help us be prepared for possible future pandemics [2, 3]. One of the most significant lessons of the pandemic is the importance of a robust and resilient healthcare system. The virus has exposed weaknesses in healthcare infrastructure, highlighting the need for investment in public healthcare. Governments worldwide have realized the importance of preparedness, early diagnosis, and rapid response to combat infectious diseases. However, cooperation between health workers, researchers, and policymakers — vital for effective crisis management — is now weaker than ever.

Another lesson learned is the value of scientific research and evidence-based decision-making. The pandemic has demonstrated the importance of relying on scientific expertise and data when formulating policies and guidelines. It has also shown us the importance of effective communication between scientists and the public to build trust and ensure compliance with public health measures. The pandemic has underscored the significance of global collaboration in times of crisis to share knowledge, resources, and expertise to develop vaccines and treatments at an unprecedented pace. The speed at which multiple vaccines were created is a testament to what can be achieved through international cooperation. This lesson will be crucial in addressing future global challenges such as climate change or pandemics. Nevertheless, especially when the pandemic was over, loud anti-scientific no-vax groups stole the scene, taking over the stage in the media, sponsored by unscrupulous politicians in search of some more consensus. A recent European survey suggests that initiatives to counter misinformation are essential, encouraging health professionals and citizens to seek information from reliable government sources. [4].

On an individual level, the pandemic has taught us valuable lessons about personal resilience and adaptability. We have had to cope with changes in our daily routines, isolation from loved ones, financial hardships, and mental health challenges. The experience has emphasized the importance of self-care, mental wellness, and building strong support networks. We have witnessed a shift towards remote work and digitalization, accelerating technology adoption in various sectors, from education and healthcare to retail and entertainment. This has highlighted the importance of digital literacy and the need for equitable access to technology. The lessons learned from this experience will shape the future of work and education, leading to greater flexibility and innovation. Healthcare workers are the most critical asset within communities, particularly during crises resulting from a pandemic. Develop-

ing approaches that reduce burnout and focus on improving mental health and well-being is crucial in building our preparedness to face future pandemics [4].

The pandemic has also brought attention to existing social inequities and disparities. We have seen how specific communities, such as low-income individuals, minority groups, and frontline workers, have been disproportionately affected by the virus. This has prompted discussions about social justice, healthcare accessibility, and income inequality. We must address these systemic issues to create a fairer society. The pandemic has reminded us of the value of human connection and community, to support each other through virtual gatherings or acts of kindness. This lesson serves as a reminder that we are all interconnected and that our collective well-being depends on supporting one another with empathy and compassion toward those in need. Unfortunately, we must recognize we are facing the worst conflictual period since the end of World War II, as if the pandemic had disrupted global equilibria and fueled regional and international conflicts. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed existing fault lines and geopolitical tensions, which can escalate into a world war if not adequately addressed. In a world that has survived the challenge of the pandemic, other economic and social crises have exploded, paving the way for resurgent nationalisms and winds of war, which make it increasingly challenging to confine conflicts to a regional scale.

Strained international relations and cooperation, blame games, finger-pointing, and a lack of coordination among nations characterized the initial response to the outbreak, but even more so, the end of the pandemic. The international lockdown measures and restrictions have resulted in severe economic downturns, job losses, and increased poverty levels. Financial hardships can create social unrest and exacerbate existing inequalities within societies. In such circumstances, there is a risk that countries may resort to protectionism, trade disputes, or other forms of economic warfare as they strive for self-reliance and security.

Moreover, the pandemic has strained international relations and cooperation. This lack of collaboration can further exacerbate geopolitical rivalries and fuel conflicts. In regions with existing tensions or territorial disputes, such as Eastern Europe, the South China Sea, or the Middle East, a fighting attitude and lack of collaboration can exacerbate geopolitical rivalries and fuel conflicts, disrupting global equilibria and favoring opportunistic actions or power plays. It is crucial to recognize these potential threats and war crimes associated with either aggression or disproportionate reactions and work towards mitigating them.

The lessons learned from the pandemic should inform global efforts to strengthen international institutions, promote multilateralism, and enhance cooperation. Countries must prioritize diplomacy, dialogue, and collaborative problem-solving over unilateral actions or aggression. The health crisis has strained resources such as medical supplies, vaccines, and essential commodities. When access to these resources becomes limited or politicized, there is a risk of increased competition or armed conflict over access to vital resources. Countries may prioritize their citizens' needs at the expense of others, leading to further geopolitical tension.

Another significant concern is how misinformation and disinformation during the pandemic can contribute to social polarization and foster mistrust among nations. False narratives regarding the origins of the virus or conspiracy theories can create divisions between countries and erode trust in international institutions. This erosion of trust may hinder diplomatic efforts to resolve conflicts peacefully or impede cooperation in public health or climate change areas.

In conclusion, while the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us valuable lessons in resilience and preparedness, it has also exposed vulnerabilities that have the potential to disrupt global equilibria and fuel regional and global conflicts. By recognizing these risks and taking proactive measures to address them, we can strive for a more peaceful and stable world in the aftermath of this crisis. International cooperation, diplomacy, and efforts towards social justice will be essential in navigating these challenges effectively. After World War II, sharing resources and international collaboration resulted in Europe's most extended peaceful period, progressing toward a strengthened Union, which brought wealth, freedom, and better living conditions, which in recent years were troubled by resurgent nationalisms. Lessons learned with the pandemic should give a new impetus to efforts to build up and reinforce a large community struggling for health, peace, and prosperity in European countries and worldwide.

ANTONIO MUTTI

REFERENCES

1. Corradi M, Ranzieri S. COVID-19 Marked a Change in the Scope of Occupational Medicine from Occupational to Work-related Diseases and Total Worker Health®. *Med Lav.* 2023; 114(6): e2023053
2. Agius R. COVID-19 in Occupational Settings: Lessons Learned for Occupational Medicine in the UK. *Med Lav.* 2023; 114(6): e2023055
3. Durando P, Rahmani A, Montecucco A, Dini G. Learning from the Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic: A New Paradigm for Occupational Biohazard Assessment and Management. *Med Lav.* 2023; 114(6): e2023056
4. Moreno-Llamas A, Olivares JM, García-Mayor J, Torres-Cantero A, Devine EB. Association between Covid-19 sources of information, beliefs, and vaccination rates: An EU-wide survey. *Europ J Public Health.* 2023;33(5):897-904. Doi: <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckad115>
5. Hallam KT, Popovic N, Karimi L. Identifying the Key Elements of Psychologically Safe Workplaces in Healthcare Settings. *Brain Sci.* 2023;13(10):1450. Doi: 10.3390/brainsci13101450