



Reflections on World Health Day

CARE AND IMPROVING
THE USE OF MEDICINES

This World Health Day is an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with the microbial world. And bring the awareness, that in the face of crisis, we should not let fear and anxiety take over the human being within us. Rather, this is the moment we should, together as a species, reflect a bit deeper on who we are, how we relate to Mother Earth and its immense life forms and what is that makes us truly human.



COVID-19 is a new offering from the immense fertility of the microbial world. In its quest to come to know us as fellow living beings, it has an unquenchable and deadly curiosity. Along with that curiosity it leaves us a gift – the gift of a mirror! As it makes its journey, it allows us to see how we live our lives. The patchwork of the obvious and the hidden, the loud and brash that we always see and the subtle and indistinct we do not.

In this way have older people, those with chronic disease of many kinds, and those without access to health care become visible. Yet those with resources are not spared by the inquisitive virus either– how is it in those quarters? – it wants to know. This situation shows the importance of public health as well as that of the individual within the whole. No one is exempt, and everyone contributes. Our individual behavior affects the whole.

We also see the underlying importance of food security, the quality of our nutrition and hygiene. We see how the current lock-

down in many countries affects those without resources, who must travel long distances to work or access resources. The challenges with rationing of foods in many countries and threat to food security has been laid bare.

There is also the darker human response to catastrophe and crisis – a panic that creates scapegoating, suspicion and selfishness that travels like wildfire. What the COVID-19 crisis has indeed set off, in some places, is a rush of panicking individuals hoarding up 'seeds for the winter'. There is little paracetamol on shelves in many countries and the high tech machinery in hospitals must be rationed now. The possibility of the anti-malarial chloroquine as a potential treatment led to price gouging, thus threatening equitable access.

And what does it mean in this moment for the way people both excessively venerate and rampantly abuse medicines? This moment tells us what it is like without effective medicines. Can we

practice restraint and wisdom in the face of this crisis? This is our test now. Can we hold back from using antibiotics and antiviral medicines when we don't need them to ensure that those who need it most get it first and also we don't lose their future effectiveness because of resistance? It equally challenges the current narrative that there is a magic pill for everything as opposed to preventative measures.

A new vaccine must go to all, with clear guidelines for its use and access to all, beginning with those with highest priority. Our creative ability to organize logistics and to ensure that it is shared around the world is urgently required. What is clear is that every person on the planet is important in both the spread and containment of the infection.

As Emiliano Mariscal says, care is a precious human attribute. Relationship and acts of kindness, assistance and communication are the essence of human need and happiness. Looking after each other is paramount.

We can see it emerging in many stories of people organizing themselves to help the elderly, and those at risk, and in those who take seriously the need to self isolate if they have traveled or come into contact with the virus. We see it in those who are supporting the health workers at the frontline, by minding their children and doing their food shopping etc. We see it in the way people are communicating at a distance through music and other joy-giving activities. We also see it among our medical and other colleagues working on the frontlines, caring and treating patients suffering from Covid 19, often risking their own lives. We grieve together for those who have died.

Let us hope it is solidarity and not scapegoating that marks the response of our societies in the days ahead. Otherwise, we will only make ourselves more vulnerable and the vicious cycle of a pathogenic relationship – of perpetual war - with the microbial world will continue without end. This is the time when we, although physically distant, should stand together in heart and mind and face our challenges together as a global community with both wisdom and courage.

