

Holiday message

[15 November 2020]

By the time this editorial is in print, you may be listening to Mariah sing about shunning her millions because all she really wants is you, while you sip mulled wine or eggnog. My scientific mind does wonder how you “nog” an “egg.” After extensive research (a.k.a., Google) I determined it is some combination of grog (rum), nog (strong ale), noggins (wooden mugs), and eggs (oval-shaped things that come from chickens).

All joking aside, I know that most would agree that 2021 has been a difficult year. The first global pandemic of our generation marched on with increased cases and deaths, often affecting the most vulnerable among us. Many families lost loved ones without the opportunity to comfort them in person and say goodbye. Just as the virus seemed to ebb, another wave developed, driven by the Delta variant.

The year started with much hope as the scientific miracle of rapidly developed COVID-19 vaccines became a reality and doses were put into arms. I think many of us in the medical community were taken by surprise by the degree of vaccine hesitancy and resistance encountered as the months rolled on. Conspiracy theorists were having a heyday, often spreading misinformation through social media to all who would listen. Primary care became an often-confrontational place as we did our best to educate our patients on the safety and efficacy of the vaccines. Despite this, I am proud to say that British Columbia has done better than many jurisdictions, with approximately 80% of the province’s population being vaccinated up to this point.

In 2021 we also experienced continued worsening of the opioid crisis. In the first

9 months of this year, over 1500 individuals died of opioid poisoning in our province. Sadly, this eclipses last year’s record-setting pace. Solutions for this crisis remain elusive and difficult to come by. Despite its human devastation, it currently receives less focus in the news, in part due to the presence of the global pandemic.

It’s been a difficult year on a personal level, too, as my wife became ill and continues to bravely battle what is at best an uphill struggle. Not by choice, I have sampled the health care system from the other side, initially during hos-

pital COVID-19 restrictions, and can attest to how trying it’s been for those who are ill as well as for their concerned loved ones.

So, not the best year on paper, but the optimist in me remains undaunted. The kindness I have experienced on a personal level has been overwhelming and has reinforced my belief in the underlying goodness of people. On a broader level, I have been so impressed with the way in which our profession has handled this difficult pandemic. We have been on the front lines since the beginning and can be proud of

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our dedication, selflessness, and resilience. As I look ahead to 2022, I am confident that the doctors of BC will face whatever challenges arise with the same compassion and skill.

Happy holidays to you all.

—David R. Richardson, MD



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Growing up in a pandemic

At the beginning of this pandemic, there were many unknowns about the virus. No one knew how contagious the virus was, whether it affected children and adults equally, or how long the pandemic would last. My daughter was born during the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition of bringing a new life into this world alongside the constant worry of how to best take care of a newborn during a pandemic was definitely overwhelming in those first few months. What we didn't know at the time, but do now, is that SARS-CoV-2 will be with us for a long time. The worry of how the pandemic will impact babies and children in the long term, especially in terms of development and mental health, is very real and probably resonates with many other parents.

Due to a lack of social interactions, and with public health measures such as social distancing and masking in place, children are missing out on crucial ways to hone social skills and develop language. A retrospective study from China looking at the SARS pandemic of 2003 suggested that experiencing SARS in childhood was associated with delayed milestones, including walking, saying a sentence, and dressing independently.¹ That is worrisome, as this pandemic is even more extensive and on a much larger global scale.

The first few years are a crucial time in a child's development. As we try to carry on with the pandemic being our new normal, I now find it challenging to weigh the risks and benefits of trying to establish social interactions while also staying safe. I want my daughter to experience as much of a normal childhood as possible, while doing it within our family's comfort zone.

The COVID-19 pandemic is undoubtedly also contributing to significant mental health concerns. A study in China investigating symptoms of depression and anxiety among close to 2000 students in Hubei Province, the epicentre of the outbreak, showed 22.6% reported depressive symptoms while 18.9% reported anxiety symptoms in the last year.² In the US, there has been a significant increase in emergency department visits related to mental health for children younger than 18 years. Compared with 2019, there was an increase of 24% in children aged 5 to 11 and an increase of 31% in those aged 12 to 17.³ This is concerning given the potential long-term impacts of this pandemic on youth for years to come. There will likely be many downstream effects, which I think all health care providers will come to deal with. Caring for a young, evolving mind can be a challenge on its own, but the pandemic adds an even more complex layer.

As the pandemic continues to evolve, such as with the introduction of the Delta variant and challenges with vaccinations, we are all learning to carry on with our lives. For some children; unfortunately, the pandemic is all they have known. My daughter thinks it is normal for people to wear masks and that we rarely have play dates indoors. Being a parent is hard enough, and the pandemic has not made it easier. If this is our new normal, then we need to find new ways to live our

lives and teach our children the same. How we as adults perceive and deal with the pandemic can have an enormous impact on children's psychology and well-being. Constantly comparing things to the past might be a reason for disappointment, and constantly thinking about the past might be a reason for anxiety. Although this pandemic has taken a toll on everyone's lives, I hope that in the end it builds resilience in our future generations and we are able to one day look back and learn from it. ■

—Yvonne Sin, MD

My daughter thinks it is normal for people to wear masks and that we rarely have play dates indoors.

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