Commentary

This is different

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Martin Luther King Jr, in the midst of the civil rights movement, referred to the ongoing protests by noting, ‘It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment’.1 Broaden the context to the entire world as it faces and responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, and his words resonate today. The healthcare system and society more broadly are facing a situation with little precedent in its pace, health and economic impact, global reach and the societal distress it causes.

The pandemic has escalated at breathtaking speed, leaving healthcare organisations and professionals struggling to plan, respond and cope. On 27th February 2020, the Johns Hopkins University Centre for Systems Sciences and Engineering reported 82 700 cases worldwide, most of these in China; just over 1 month later, on 1st April 2020, that number was exceeded by cases in Italy (105 792), Spain (102 136) and the USA (189 633), while the global figure stood at 873 767.2 On the same date and time, deaths worldwide numbered 43 288, with the Imperial College COVID-19 response team estimating that unmitigated, the pandemic could lead to 40 million deaths globally this year.3

Allied to the health impact there is the socioeconomic one. As social distancing is adopted by most affected countries, the reliance of local and global economies on the unimpeded mobility, and close physical proximity, of large numbers of those in work, has been exposed. In the USA on 27 March 2020, the numbers filing for unemployment benefit jumped from some 210 000 to nearly 3.3 million,4 and governments worldwide have been announcing economic stimulus packages at unprecedented scale and pace. On 25 March 2020 it was estimated that over a quarter of the world’s population were confined to work,7 but the pandemic makes our mission of leadership support and development more urgent than ever before.

In the coming weeks, readers of BMJ Leader will find comment, opinion and reflection from leaders engaged in the COVID-19 pandemic response and from leadership development practitioners across the globe. Existing article formats will be complemented with new ones, allowing us to share the experiences of more leaders more rapidly, and across a broader range of contexts. Consistent with our mandate as a peer-reviewed journal that aims to advance research, we will continue to welcome original research on leadership issues, and fast track the review process for submissions directly related to covid-19. We hope that through these changes, BMJ Leader can play a supporting and agile role, informing, connecting and nurturing those providing leadership, at all levels, as this great crisis unfolds and in time, we trust, overcome.

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