10 minutes with Dr Gregory R Ciottone, MD, FACEP, FFSEM, President of the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine

FIRST AND FOREMOST, ARE THERE ANY KEY LEADERSHIP MESSAGES YOU WANT TO GET OUT TO OUR READERSHIP?
The current COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that is unprecedented in recent history. As healthcare systems are being overwhelmed and economies are being decimated, we are doing a disservice to the world’s population if we do not provide clear leadership and data-driven strategies. Each sovereign nation must do this, but we also must understand that we are a global community, and the actions we take as individual countries can have a dramatic effect on the world as a whole. When it comes to healthcare crisis leadership, there are no country borders.

TELL US A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR LEADERSHIP ROLE AND HOW IT IS CHANGING AS A RESULT OF THE PANDEMIC?
I am the Director of the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center Fellowship in Disaster Medicine, the largest training programme in Disaster Medicine in the USA, which hosts 10 fellows each year from around the world. Utilising our fellows and more than 60 alumni, most of whom are in leadership positions in their home countries, we have pivoted with this disaster and became operational, creating a set of tasksforces addressing specific issues around the COVID-19 disasters that have resulted in the implementation of our recommendations on local levels across the USA and around the world. It has been gratifying to see how our educational initiative has transitioned to becoming operational in response to COVID-19.

I am also the President of the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine (WADEM), and as such am working with our leadership to create relevant content for our members, who span over 55 countries around the world, as well as the general public. We are focusing on information in the form of webinars, podcasts and links to pertinent literature to provide a data-driven analysis of this pandemic. I believe it is important to have reliable sources of information, such as WADEM, WHO and CDC so that healthcare workers and global citizens can make educated decisions for themselves and their families.

WHAT EVENTS IN YOUR PAST EXPERIENCE ARE MOST INFORMING YOUR LEADERSHIP IN THIS PANDEMIC?
Perhaps the most significant past leadership experience I had in my career was the time I spent in the United States National Disaster Medical System as Commander of a level-1 Disaster Medical Unit and The President Of The United States’. Dr Ciottone has held visiting professorship posts in Disaster Medicine at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium and Universita del Piemonte Orientale in Italy.

Biography
Dr Gregory R Ciottone is the President of the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine. He is an Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School, and an Instructor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health (HSPHS). He is the founder and director of the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center Fellowship in Disaster Medicine, the first of its kind at a Harvard teaching hospital, and the Medical Director for the National Preparedness Leadership Initiative, a joint programme of the HSPHS and the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. He also serves as a consultant to the White House Medical Unit.

Dr Ciottone has taught educational programmes in Disaster Medicine and Emergency Management in over 30 countries around the world, and has consulted domestically for the US State Department, Department of Health and Human Services, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Justice and the White House Medical Unit. He has written over 100 scholarly works, including the first and second editions of the leading textbook in the field, Ciottone’s Disaster Medicine, and in 2016 was recognised by the Physician to the President for ‘Outstanding Achievement In Support Of The White House Medical Unit And The President Of The United States’. Dr Ciottone was the 2018 recipient of the Disaster Medical Sciences Award from the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Dr Ciottone’s clinical and field experience includes 25 years as a practicing emergency physician and over 500 missions as a flight physician on an aeromedical helicopter service. Early in his career, he worked with the United States Agency for International Development to create and implement sustainable disaster medical education programmes throughout the former Soviet Union that have trained over 50 000 healthcare providers, and later helped lead an International Atomic Energy Agency nuclear accident preparedness programme for Eastern Europe. He also served as commander of one of the first federal disaster medical assistance teams (Massachusetts-2) into Ground Zero during the World Trade Center disaster on 11 September 2001, and has deployed to a number of other crises around the world, including the Haiti earthquake. Dr Ciottone has held visiting professorship posts in Disaster Medicine at Vrije Universiteit Brussel in Belgium and Universita del Piemonte Orientale in Italy.
Medical Assistance Team (Massachusetts 2), and leading that team as one of the first federal teams into Ground Zero on 11 September 2001. We remained onsite for 2 weeks and treated over 400 patients per day in our five medical treatment stations. I learnt a great deal about crisis leadership during that time, skills I continue to use today. Later, as Medical Director of Emergency Management at Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, I was able to help create important disaster preparedness and response plans for a major medical centre and Harvard teaching hospital, including a comprehensive plan for pandemic influenza.

Speaking globally about this pandemic, while I think there are important lessons SARS and other recent outbreaks have taught us about how to respond to novel viruses as they emerge, I believe there were crucial lessons from the Ebola outbreak that had we heeded may have impacted the current COVID-19 pandemic dramatically. Early containment is the most effective modality in the prevention of pandemics.1 Of note, and to be examined further when this crisis is over, we had a wake-up call about early containment 6 years ago. In 2014, I advocated for home containment, as well as early implementation of social distancing must understand the tremendous mitigative power of early disease outbreaks, we were still not able to contain this before it became a pandemic. I understand it is a novel virus, but so were the others when they first emerged. Going forward, we can lead to changes in behaviour, particularly when in home isolation. Understanding that and respecting others is important.

ARE THERE ANY READINGS THAT YOU FIND HELPFUL FOR INSPIRATION AND SUPPORT THAT YOU WOULD RECOMMEND TO OTHERS? I recommend a great crisis leadership book called ‘You’re It: Crisis, Change, And How To Lead When It Matters Most’.4 I would also suggest taking some time to escape the onslaught of COVID news and information, which can be all-encompassing, and picking up a good book. Your mental health will benefit from some light reading in topics you enjoy. You will feel a lot better if you take the steps to maintain your own physical and mental health.

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR FROM YOUR LEADERS? I expect my leaders to understand and practice principles of crisis leadership. Crisis leaders often have to make quick decisions with little and unreliable information. The ability to pivot as the crisis changes direction, as they all do, instead of panicking is perhaps the greatest characteristic of a crisis leader. When I teach my students, I often say ‘better the planning than the plan’. I expect leaders to not be overly committed to a plan, rather that they have gone through enough preparedness and drills with their teams that the planning process is comfortable and efficient. This will allow them to better navigate a crisis. As the saying goes, if you have been to one disaster you have been to one disaster. No two crises are alike, and the ability to change
10 minutes with…

WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO HAVE A FOLLOW-UP CHAT IN A FEW WEEKS TIME?
I would be happy to.

Gregory R Ciottone,1,2 Attila Hertelendy3
1Emergency Medicine, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
2Department of Emergency Medicine, Harvard Medical School, Boston, Massachusetts, USA
3College of Business, Department of Information Systems and Business Analytics, Florida International University, Miami, Florida, USA

Correspondence to
Attila Hertelendy, College of Business, Department of Information Systems and Business Analytics, Florida International University, Miami, FL 33199, USA; ahertele@fiu.edu

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Twitter Attila Hertelendy @drhertelendy

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