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Fatherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic: an unexpected turnaround



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Giving birth in the 21st century is usually a “couple event”. While just fifty years ago the common view of paternity was of a father far from daily childcaring, whose role for children relied mostly on the financial support, today involvement from the very start is looming large in the personal aspirations of fathers. Attitude towards fatherhood has shifted visibly in the last decades [1], but COVID-19 pandemic has further re-shaped the father's role from the beginning of pregnancy. WHO classified the COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic and strict measures have been introduced, changing considerably the daily routine of citizens and the care policies in obstetrics and neonatology [2]. Our region of Lombardy is the most affected area of Italy, and we are still in the middle of deep changes in how to manage safely pregnant women and their babies. These interventions, although necessary to contain the viral spread and to provide the best care possible, is having profound implications for women and their partners, who are experiencing a new way to approach parenthood. For several years, the involvement of both parents from the very early stage of pregnancy has been encouraged, and the idea of a “nurturing” father has become a central concept also in the development of hospital policies. From attending the prenatal scans to actively participate during the delivery, this “togetherness” has been highly promoted. However, during this pandemic, we are at an unexpected turnaround: fathers are not permitted anymore to provide that kind of support, but they are forced to live this experience from an unnatural state of a spectator. COVID-19 is placing a barrier first within the couple, and then into a newly born family. The previous “togetherness” has given way to a “singleness”, which imposes the research of a new balance in a delicate period, where emotional support between parents would be vital. As Italian neonatologists working in the center of the pandemic [3], we are struggling to keep delivery and perinatal time the closest to what was just a few months ago. We have the feeling that the new moms are dealing with this epidemic with extraordinary resilience and a deep consciousness of their new role. We still not know how fathers will react to this, and if and how this separation will affect the bonding process and will have long-term consequences. Although still scarce, there is evidence showing that father's stress combined with that of mother during perinatal period is not free from late consequences in the child [4]. Clinical safety answers are currently the priority to respond, but we believe that several questions about the rise of a

new dad in this pandemic should be addressed soon. Until further evidence will be available, we underline the importance to give even more active support to new families by all the healthcare providers involved with birth.

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Dr. Gianluca Lista conceptualized and drafted the initial manuscript, Dr. Ilia Bresesti cooperated in conceptualization and wrote the manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript as submitted and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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