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Offline: COVID-19 and the ethics of memory



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Lockdowns are lifting. Lives are returning. And livelihoods are being gradually reclaimed. Very tentatively, societies are beginning to put the pandemic behind them. There are understandable fears of flare-ups. In the UK, several scientists who advise government are warning that ending strict home curfews is premature. There are still about 2000 new cases of infection being diagnosed daily in the UK (the figure in Italy is around 500) and the test, trace, and isolate system remains incomplete. According to WHO, total confirmed cases of COVID-19 are now approaching 6 million globally, with almost 400 000 deaths. It is right that we want to move on from this human catastrophe. Who wants to linger on death and despair? We all need hope and optimism, and a commitment to do better if a second wave follows. But lessons have to be learned. Governments of countries now emerging from the worst of their pandemics must urgently retain (or in some cases rebuild) public trust by establishing independent mechanisms to review their responses. Such inquiries must not be about blaming individuals. Instead, they should focus on identifying weaknesses in the systems of gathering and interpreting information, giving scientific advice to governments, and how politicians use that advice. Inquiries need to judge whether national public health systems were sufficiently prepared for a pandemic, and if not, why not. And inquiries need to set out what the pandemic tells us about the state of human security in a country—who was vulnerable, why, and how can those vulnerable groups be protected in the future? In European nations, governments need to initiate these inquiries immediately.



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There must also be an independent evaluation of the global response. The stunning announcement by President Trump on May 29, 2020, that the USA will withdraw from WHO, based on allegations of the agency's complicity with China in covering up the early stages of the pandemic, threatens to damage WHO's work in fields well beyond COVID-19. To protect (some may say restore, although no credible evidence against the agency has yet been presented) WHO's reputation, an independent COVID-19 Assessment Panel should be established as soon as possible. A similar independent



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appraisal mechanism was launched after the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in west Africa in 2014. Chaired by Dame Barbara Stocking, the Ebola Interim Assessment Panel made important recommendations, only some of which were acted upon. Given the urgency of bringing the US Government back into the agency, it would probably be wise to choose a chair from the USA—a person with respected foreign policy credentials whose views will be listened to and trusted by the White House. Given the harm President Trump's announcement is likely to cause, this panel should be established before the end of June so WHO can signal the seriousness with which it takes this evaluation—and US re-engagement.

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The desire to move on should be tempered by a further response. We all share an obligation to remember this pandemic and its consequences. The number of lives lost is simply too great to forget. The question of a society's obligation to remember is examined by Avishai Margalit in his 2002 book, *The Ethics of Memory*. There is a close relationship between memory and the lessons we must learn from national and international inquiries. Margalit writes, "The search for knowledge is therefore an exercise in reminiscence, that is, an effort to recall and recollect that which we once knew." The threat from pandemics isn't going away. Pandemics are the number one acute risk to societies in the 21st century. It is essential we find ways of embedding the memory of this pandemic within our communities so that the knowledge we gain is never forgotten. Partly, memory is our moral obligation to those whose lives were lost to COVID-19. But finding a way to remember is also our promise to future generations. It is our commitment to ensuring that society will be stronger the next time a pandemic strikes. Each nation has to forge what Margalit calls a "shared memory", "a community of memory". "Now", Margalit argues, "the responsibility over a shared memory is on each and every one in a community of memory to see to it that the memory will be kept". Securing the memory of COVID-19 is the minimum we owe to each other in the aftermath of this catastrophe.

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