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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Reduction in nosocomial infections during the COVID-19 era: a lesson to be learned

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Dear Editor-in-chief,

We read with great interest the manuscript by Losurdo et al. that reported a reduced rate of surgical site infections (SSIs) during the COVID-19 pandemic as compared with previous years, possibly in relation to the implementation of hygienic measures and the systematic use of personal protective equipment (PPE) among healthcare workers and patients [1].

In a recent paper published by our group, we investigated whether the increase in hygienic measures during the pandemic determined a decrease in hospital-acquired infections (HAIs) as compared with the previous year [2]. The study was conducted in a COVID-free unit to avoid the possible confounding impact of a COVID-19 coinfection. After adjusting for other variables, we found a significant decrease in HAIs and antibiotic prescriptions in our unit, which we think was largely attributable to the huge increase in hygienic measures.

Similarly, Ponce-Alonso et al. recently found an almost 70% reduction in Clostridioides difficile infections in a tertiary-care hospital in Spain during the COVID-19 outbreak [3]. These authors also ascribed this reduction to the stricter hygienic measures adopted during the recent pandemic.

In light of these findings, we strongly believe that a serious debate regarding the need to extend the reinforcement of infection prevention and control (including the systematic use of PPE) beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, is particularly urgent. Indeed, the high burden of HAIs in terms of mortality and public spending is well known and has been highlighted by multiple reports published by EU agencies [4]. Among HAIs, SSIs represent the most common infection in low-income countries, and one of the most frequent in high-income countries [4]. When considering the EU and USA together, an estimated 140,000 deaths are directly attributable to HAIs [5]. Moreover, it is well known that HAIs also contribute to other deaths, perhaps as many as 110,000 in the EU alone [5].

Despite countless calls for action by international agencies during the last years to improve programs for infection prevention and control worldwide [4], these calls have largely been unheeded, and a rapid improvement in the implementation of these programs seemed unlikely. However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has clearly taught us a lesson: in the midst of a health emergency, the majority of developed countries succeeded in rapidly planning and implementing more efficient hygiene protocols in their hospitals.

It would be a huge mistake to waste the opportunity offered by COVID-19 to finally take a step forward in improving infection prevention and control.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest None of the authors have any conflicts of interest to disclose.

Research involving human participants and/or animals No research involving human participants and/or animals was conducted for the purpose of this paper.

Informed consent Informed consent was not applicable to this article.

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