

# Why and how to open intensive care units to family visits during the pandemic

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## ELECTRONIC SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

## **Social, relational, and organizational challenges due to the pandemic**

The pandemic, besides posing a new, serious threat to people's health and life, has also worsened the economic and psychological difficulties [1] of large social groups. In addition, an outsized amount of news, with often conflicting content, has been spread through the mass media about the Corona Virus disease of 2019 (CoViD-19) caused by the new virus. [2] The perception of the work done in hospitals has progressively shifted, and episodes of mistrust and sometimes even hostility towards healthcare professionals are increasingly common. [3]

One must also recall that the freedom to maintain relationships with family members and friends is an expression of the right to private and family life, which is protected by the Italian Constitution and in Europe by the European Convention on Human Rights. It is particularly important in the conditions described here and can be restricted - among other things - to protect health, but always and only within strict limits about what is necessary, and what are the least invasive measures. Moreover, an incomprehensible difference has been created between places open to the public where people can enter, observing certain clear indications, and places of care - even *CoViD-19-free* - where it is absolutely forbidden to enter.

For many health professionals, the impossibility of meeting family members directly, talking to them, enabling them to participate in the care pathways and in decision-making, and above all allowing them to stay close to their loved ones, has contributed to a situation of "moral distress", which is a particular condition in which events force people to act differently from what they consider right. [4]

Re-opening ICUs may lead to work overload for healthcare professionals [5] and can only be achieved in different ways in different settings. However, it can offer some important benefits such as respect for personal rights, sharing of care pathways, greater awareness among family members, less sense of abandon for patients, and less psychological distress for family members and caregivers. [6] It can also lead to less risk of litigation related to remote communication with family members and to the emotional tension resulting from the exclusion of all contact with hospitalized relatives. [7] These benefits are so significant

as to suggest that a path to re-opening for visits should be resumed even if the pandemic indicators worsen again, as happened at the beginning of 2021. In addition, we believe it is appropriate that the hospital as a whole can open up again to family members and people who are significant to patients, encouraging their presence as far as possible beside them. [8]

### **Authors' group description**

The initiative of writing this viewpoint is coming from the Bioethics group of the Italian Society of Anaesthesia, Analgesia, Reanimation, and Intensive Care Medicine (SIAARTI): some of the authors are intensivists physicians, sharing a personal interest for bioethics and participating to the working group on these topics (GM, AGiann, GGrist, DM, MV). Other two intensivist physicians (PM and EC) have been concretely involved in writing protocols for each own hospital, to allow family visits in their CoViD-19 ICUs. The same for two nurses actively promoting projects for ICU opening and humanization (AGalaz and IG).

The intention to write such a paper has been then shared with:

- the chair of the Italian Society of Anaesthesia, Analgesia, Reanimation, and Intensive Care Medicine (SIAARTI): FP,
- the chair of the SIAARTI section of Intensive Care Medicine: GGrass,
- the chair of the SIAARTI Ethics Committee: LR,
- the chair of the European Society of Intensive Care Medicine (ESICM): MC,
- the chair of the Italian Critical Care Nurses Association (ANIARTI): SS,
- a former judge of the European Court of Human Rights: VZ.

All the authors significantly contributed to the development of the contents here presented.

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