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Editorial

Microbiology and infectious diseases in times of crisis

During the COVID-19 pandemic, molecular diagnostics were introduced to the clinical microbiology services in the country. However, there is now a question mark on the sustainability of these services due to the ongoing economic crisis. Let alone molecular diagnostics, sustaining regular diagnostic services could also become questionable at times as sustaining an uninterrupted supply chain would be a difficult task. While the fields of microbiology and medicine in itself moved forwards leaps and bounds during the past two decades, the basic principles of diagnosing and treating infectious diseases still holds true. At the same time, since the transition was rapid, there are microbiologists working in Sri Lanka, both in research and service sectors who trained in the basic techniques in microbiology. It is perhaps timely to consider moving back to basics in microbiology, and to re-visit the days when laboratory testing was done prudently yet effectively in both clinical and research laboratories. Instead of only reading manuscripts on advancements in microbiology, it may be time to go back and read the literature from the past, and make a collective decision to go back to basic principles in medicine and diagnostics

On the other hand, what impact would the ongoing economic crisis have on antimicrobial resistance? One could argue that increasing prices may reduce antibiotic pressure in the environment and ease the burden of AMR, as practices such as over the counter purchase would be less due to the escalating prices of antibiotics. However, human behavior in times like these is difficult to predict. Would people start to stockpile antibiotics and start using them instead of paying for a consultation with a general practitioner or taking time out to seek treatment from an out-patient department? On the other hand, would the lack of access to antibiotics or delay in seeking healthcare be more of an issue than antimicrobial resistance?

Amidst the uncertainties about availability of diagnostics and therapies, infection prevention and control (IPC) practices become extremely important, both in health-care environments and in the community. Being the “unglamourous” side of microbiology and infectious diseases, where the obvious “impact” is not tangible to everyone, IPC does not get its due recognition. However, the COVID-19 pandemic brought out the importance of preventing infections in the community as well as IPC practices in the health care setting. Both the general public as well as health care workers have had a long period of ‘training’ in the importance of adhering to preventive practices. However, concerns and priorities of both the general public and health care professionals have changed during these times. Therefore, how the importance of these need to be communicated has to change, from enforcement to empowering.

Antimicrobial stewardship (AMS) is another less glamorous aspect of clinical microbiology that is of timely importance. Just like IPC, AMS is not given its due recognition. However, the current times of potential drug shortages would be a good opportunity to introduce AMS initiatives into practice, so that available antibiotics could be used rationally.

Infectious diseases have changed the history of human civilization. At the same time, societal changes and social issues have also changed the natural history of infectious diseases. The current issue of the Sri Lankan Journal of Infectious Diseases contains manuscripts on a wider spectrum related to infectious diseases, including ones that explore the perceptions of society on various aspects of infectious diseases. We hope you will enjoy reading them and would give us and the authors your inputs on the content published.

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