

# The Arrow of Apollo



*'I swear by Apollo Healer, by Asclepius, by Hygieia, by Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses, making them my witnesses, that I will carry out, according to my ability and judgment, this oath and this indenture ...'*

The above is the beginning of the Hippocratic Oath, taken by all physicians. This traces its origin to Greek mythology where Apollo was revered as the chief god of healing. Nonetheless, his far-reaching arrows could equally inflict epidemics on humankind. For sure, if we were living 2,500 years ago, Covid-19 would have risen through his arrow-heads smeared with this +ve-sense RNA virus.

The International Monetary Fund estimates the pandemic will cost the global economy in excess of \$28 trillion in lost output by 2025. Discussing this means sieving through a cornucopia of reasons including lockdown measures, reduction of future earnings for students affected by schools' closure, share of tourism on one's economy, quality of governance ... the list goes on. Regretfully, any initial attempts to seed trans-continental cooperation were undermined by distrust. Suffice it to mention the resolution pushed in 2020 by the EU and Australia calling for a review into the Chinese origins of Covid-19 and ensuing delays in alerting the international community on this disease. Against this backdrop we are still experiencing the laissez-faire attitude of nincompoops the world over which has contributed no small part to the spread of this virus, especially to the elderly, vulnerable, as well as front-liners.

In stark contrast, the raw and harsh realities faced by families are aptly embodied by the heart-rendering image on our cover page, captured by Darrin Zammit Lupi. His daughter Rebecca, or Becs as she was affectionately called, has since left us. Zammit Lupi's rendering illustrates the universality of the manner in which Covid-19 has made living life a gargantuan challenge for sick people.

Those actions which we invariably took for granted are those which are most sorely missed... holding hands, capturing the smell of the skin, or seeing one's reflection in the eyes of our loved ones, especially the elderly and sick relatives ...

In the midst of this discordance, science has struggled to prevail, first through the advice conveyed by public health specialists and then through pre-clinical and clinical studies. We now have a better understanding of this virus. In keeping with this, we are also better equipped with the necessary armamentarium. The challenges which invariably present themselves, although foreseen, corroborate the need to share knowledge and form partnerships between different stakeholders. These challenges range from new variants to logistics relating to vaccine administration. Still, only a few weeks ago we saw the president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, admitting that the EU "underestimated the difficulties of mass production [of vaccines]" and that "mistakes were made". A far cry from her "European success story" trumpeted in December.

By this stage we all know that politics and public health are uncomfortable bedfellows. Walking the tightrope of wealth and health is not easy and being armchair critics is easy enough for most of us. I will not delve on the issues stemming from lockdowns but indeed, many countries are now taking off from the backburner important discussions relating to economic growth measurements. This change of heart has picked up momentum during the pandemic. Similarly, such discussions are percolating in the echelons of the Maltese parliament. Of note is the doughnut economic model - alluded to during my recent interviews with two public health trailblazers residing abroad, Prof. Sandro Galea in the US & Prof. Claire Gerada in the UK - departing from the conservative 'GDP', which considers other important variables such as wellbeing indexes.

*O Brave New World!*

*Pan Ellus*