

Never waste a good crisis: lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic

Clement Tan^{1,2,*}

¹Department of Ophthalmology, National University Health System, Singapore;

²Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore, Singapore

The year 2020 has, arguably, been an *annus horribilis* for many of us. It also seems to be the year we could shake the dust off many well-loved aphorisms and maxims. Everything that could go wrong did often go wrong. Those who failed to learn from history were indeed doomed to repeat it. We reap what we sow.

There is one maxim, though, that we should all take heed to, particularly as we come to the end of 2020: "Never waste a good crisis." This line is attributed to Winston Churchill, who was the great wartime Prime Minister of Great Britain and led it through that 6-year long crisis.

Adopting this mindset, we can look back at the year gone by and forward to the year ahead (for the COVID-19 crisis is by no means over), learn from it, and plan ahead for the next year.

What did we as a department learn?

People can and will rise to the occasion

Many of our doctors and nurses volunteered to serve on the front lines of the COVID-19 efforts, joining swab teams, primary care teams, running facilities for housing foreign workers, providing extra manpower for the emergency department, organizing aid for the foreign workers, and so on. In the meantime, the rest of the department pulled together to re-organize workflows, reschedule appointment and surgeries, enforce safe-distancing, team segregation, conduct webinars to replace conferences, keep teaching and research going, and more. It was a tremendous team effort and everyone had a part to play in keeping the department afloat. As we move into a next phase of the pandemic with the distribution of vaccines and things change yet again, I look forward with hope that the team will rise to meet the challenges head on again.

* Dr. Clement Tan is Associate Professor at the Department of Ophthalmology, Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, National University of Singapore; Senior Consultant at the Department of Ophthalmology, National University Hospital, Singapore; and Group Director of Ophthalmology, National University Health System, Singapore.

A crisis is a good time to shake things up

Very early in the pandemic, we learned that the old way of running our clinic was really very manpower-dependent and we had not leveraged on new systems and technology to make our lives easier. We also had inefficiencies built into the work schedule that had gone unnoticed for a long time. The pandemic has forced us to review some of these “old ways” and initiate change. We took a data-based approach to re-doing the rosters and the appointments, re-organized the clinic staff, and reset capacity, leveraging on IT to reduce the requirement for manpower. While it has been hard to make progress on this front, I hope we will sustain the momentum as we move into 2021.

Innovate, innovate, innovate

That must surely be one of the big lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic. From masks to swab kits to vaccines, from telemedicine to Zoom webinars, it has been innovations that have kept us going through the year. We had to accelerate our plans for teleconsultations in order to reduce the crowds and maintain safe-distancing. We found ourselves testing out different barriers for slit lamps and ways to reduce aerosol generation in the operating theatre. Not all innovations need be spectacular. Many were, indeed, very simple and effective. The key, though, to all the innovations really must be the Yoda principle: “Do or do not, there is no try”.

The new year brings promise with the introduction of the vaccine. But it looks certain that many of the safe-distancing measures, curtailment on travel, disruptions to business, and so on will remain for quite some time more. I hope we will all be able to take the challenges in our stride and face them with fortitude, courage to change, and openness to ideas. With all that we can learn and hopefully develop, we will then not have wasted a good crisis.