



Letter to the Editor

Flying higher than politics: The goal of preventive medicine at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic



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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

The present SARS-CoV-2-caused COVID-19 pandemic [1] has clearly shown that great health crises can elicit heated political and scientific debates. The history of medicine teaches us how, throughout the centuries, the medical art has seen vicious attacks against pioneers and their discoveries as well as fundamental advances slowed down as a result of such issues.

A classic example is that of the Hungarian physician Ignác Fülöp Semmelweis (1818–1865), who understood the role of a lack of physicians' hand hygiene as the cause of puerperal fever but was heavily criticised by some luminaries of that time like Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) or Carl Edvard Marius Levy (1808–1865) [2]. Another one is represented by Girolamo Mercuriale's (1530–1606) dismissal of the 1575–1577 plague of Venice as a minor disease, scorning the far-reaching intuitions and strategies of the local physicians, who just happened not to share his academic status [3].

While in scientific terms, the past of medicine, has always been a battlefield, quite to the contrary, it was specifically during major wars that science managed to fly higher than fights. One example is offered by Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), who, despite his known hatred for the English, had a great admiration for the English physician Edward Jenner (1749–1823) to the extent that, when a plea was to be addressed to the French emperor for the liberation of British prisoners held in France, Jenner was the man to present it [4]. A comparable scenario happened during WW1 at the death of Emil Adolf von Behring (1854–1917), a German, who, despite the bloodbath occurring in France between troops of the British Empire and those of the German Empire – November 1916 had just seen the end of the carnage of the Battle of the Somme costing more than 1 million casualties in total –, received a eulogistic obituary in the prestigious London-based medical journal *The*

Lancet, which praised the scientist's capital discoveries, particularly in his fight against two major infectious diseases, tetanus and diphtheria, and mentioned his research on tuberculosis [5].

These two bright examples should stimulate politicians all over the globe to ponder on the universal role of medical discoveries, effectively shielding science from detrimental attacks and protecting its workers from the dangers of an ill-conceived communication. This will likely prove very important in view of the planned vaccination campaign against COVID-19.

While a certain degree of conflict may always be part of human transactions, science can and must fly higher than fights that have nothing to do with the goal of improving human health.

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