

## Oh Lord- Please Don't Let Me Have It!

I work in the endocrinology clinic of a colleague in the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Being an eminent astute diagnostician with his finger on the pulse of internal medicine, his clinic is always busy. Most patients attending suffer from diabetes, the metabolic syndrome, hypertension and cardiovascular problems. In Trinidad, COVID-19 was confirmed in early March, claimed its first victim on March 25, and border closure and lockdown followed. The clinic operated remotely, re-opened with strict public health measures in May and took speed when phase 3 of lockdown reopening happened in late June.

Later on August 15, the Chief Medical Officer confirmed community spread of the virus. Vigilance was high in the clinic. A long-standing patient, over 65 years, with a history of difficult to control diabetes, hypertension, obesity, ischemic heart disease, and degenerative lumbosacral disc neuropathy pleaded to be seen because of considerable pain in her left lower leg. Most patients were being controlled remotely, but this gentle lady, attending over the years, battling crisis after crisis was accommodated on that Friday. She spent close to 30 minutes with me. I examined her and discussed her case with a vascular surgeon who promised to help her in the coming week. A few days later, the clinic manager was desperately trying to reach me, and she got my daughter-in-law instead. The patient had informed her that her grandchild, who was living in her house, had tested positive for COVID-19. I now knew the experience of "my heart sank." The news gave me a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach of utter dejection and fear.

I live in an apartment, separate from the main house where my son, his wife and their two little children under three years live. My aged sister with interstitial lung disease using an oxygenator lives in the same apartment. The family enjoys meals and quality time together. Now an eerie quiet was present, everyone was cautiously 'normal.' The children were due to return that evening from their other grandparents' house. My son and his wife decided the children should stay put. They talked to them on video calls. It was decided we would all isolate, I would be in isolation at the apartment. I kept reassuring myself I was asymptomatic, then reminded myself that was no indication of being bereft of viral presence. Should I even be around? My grandchildren-could I see them, hug them? I would stay cordoned off at the apartment, invoking Heaven's mercy. The clinic manager and the chief spoke with me. Both were reassuring and comforting. The background message was stay put! At home I hardly spoke, interacted or surfaced, and felt submerged with guilt. Various thoughts crowded my mind. With contact tracing I was going to be under the lens. If testing was positive I would be hauled off to quarantine by the Ministry of Health. I packed my bag in readiness for the call. In torment I saw the alien look-alikes in their white personal protective equipment waiting to collect me. I saw myself saying final goodbyes to my family at a distance, longing to touch, so near yet so far. I felt like a leper, to be shunned by human contact.

The Ministry newly decreed that all asymptomatic contacts must self-quarantine at home. Relief engulfed me, knowing I could stay at home, and not be taken away by the 'aliens.' I was sure I had no symptoms. Each day on rising I checked, and several times in the lonely wakeful nights for the CDC list of symptoms-fever/chills, cough, dyspnoea, fatigue, muscle/body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion, runny nose, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. I re-read the

annoying teaser that the list did not include all symptoms and worse, no symptoms did not equate with being 'clean'. I must get tested. All PCR tests at the time in Trinidad were done by the Ministry of Health, and the few laboratories offering the test awaited Ministry approval. When should I test? Was I contagious? Symptom appearance averaged five to six days, but viral shedding could continue for 14 days. The Head of the health facility suggested day six, after contact was appropriate. I went in to get swabbed, another frightful experience. More aliens, intense security presence ensuring distancing and hand washing, as I wait in the well organised drive-in. An unexpected COVID-19 fatality arrived, and sanitising and bureaucracy took over two hours pushing my adrenaline to pheochromocytoma levels.

The thin wiry stick with fine bristles entered my nostril as though searching for my brain, anchors on and sweeps through the oropharynx. I waited 24, 48 hours in a nightmare of terror, until my phone registered the simple word "negative." Thank you, God! Relief, tears, never ending deep long breaths ensue, then the chief sends a message - patient is "positive, but asymptomatic-lie low." Quarantine continued for the full 14 days. The torment of possible infection has kept me away from the clinic. Do I have the courage to experience such trauma again, to put my family at risk, to feel guilty I may infect them, to not see or touch or hug my grandchildren? I'm not yet ready. I know I will and want to return to the busy clinic and patient encounters, because that's what charges physicians' batteries. Until then, I will "live."