BEING INVESTED BY THE THIRD (OR FOURTH) COVID WAVE

This is not the topic I had in mind to discuss. My plan was to positively present the future of dental research, education and scientific events. However, something went catastrophically wrong in some part of the world, and when things go wrong some reflections on possible mistakes ought to be made in order that we might learn from our mistakes and do better in the future.

Not all countries behaved the same way in response to the COVID pandemic. On the basis of this we can grossly generalize and group them into the following geographical areas:
- Asia and Oceania,
- Latin America,
- US, UK and Israel,
- Europe.

ASIA AND OCEANIA: everything began in China, and while we have no idea what actually happened over there, we can now see that China's exports have increased by over 60% and the Chinese economy is booming. China has developed several vaccines, which are currently being sold to several different countries. Japan and South Korea did fairly well in a different way, with relatively low death tolls and stable economies. Oceania too, managed to stay afloat, while India struggled due to its vast population and lack of resources. Nevertheless, India did manage to develop its own vaccine, which was hurriedly approved in January 2021. Russia did not perform too well either, but developed and hastily approved its own vaccine as far back as August 2020. Despite the usual Western scepticism and sense of superiority towards the East, the science seems to be bearing their confidence out.

LATIN AMERICA: this part of the word was badly hit by the COVID pandemic, was unable to organize a proper response, and is unfortunately paying a high price in terms of lives and economic stability. Even now the vaccination campaign has barely begun. This is not merely fault of the Brazilian president, since the entire continent has been devastated by the pandemic, and other issues such as the longstanding social inequality, together with the fragile health systems, political instability, diffuse corruption and social unrest, undoubtedly played a determining role.

US, UK AND ISRAEL: after an initial devastating blow, most likely ascribable to an initial underestimation of the problem, and misguided political decisions which led to immense death tolls and significant blows to their economies, these countries have learned their lesson the hard way. They are now worldwide leaders in the vaccination campaign and can see the light at the end of the tunnel. As such, they will be the first Western countries to emerge from the COVID pandemic.

EUROPE: Europe too as a whole initially underestimated the problem, and was unable to properly reorganize and adapt to the new challenges. Too many lives have been lost, and the economy badly affected, but is Europe too nearly at the end of the tunnel? The short answer is no. It will emerge eventually, and sooner rather than later, but there has been an unjustifiable delay in vaccination, which will cost more lives and further

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exacerbate the economic crisis. It was clear to (almost) everybody early on that to win the war against COVID19 quickly, the most efficient weapon would be mass vaccination. The first hurdle was to rapidly develop new vaccines, which, incredibly, was achieved. So what went wrong?

From my vantage point, I see two major mistakes: a strategic one and a logistic one. Vaccines have to be tested to make sure that they are safe and effective. This will involve independent scrutiny of clinical research by the regulatory bodies. Why was Europe always the last to approve anything? Even slower than the FDA. Instead of protecting people, the European regulatory bodies caused more deaths and damage to the economy. In an emergency, the normal rules are not sufficient, we need to make faster decisions. Some shortcuts and risks need to be taken, just like the British did, not only fast-tracking vaccine approval, but also electing to vaccinate the entire population with just a single dose, at least initially.

It is good that Europe negotiated together the purchase of vaccines, but the decisions they made were naïve, and the contracts they signed obscure. In the middle of a global war, they wanted to purchase cheaply the weapons were simultaneously in demand by the rest of the world, who were willing to pay 3 or 4 times the agreed price. It is obvious that it in the long run it would have been much cheaper to buy the vaccines at a higher price than remain for longer at the mercy of a virus that is still taking lives and ruining economies. Would buying vaccines at a higher price have been the best solution? I do not think so. The only sensible solution would have been to invest time and resources into additional vaccine production sites in different countries.

Hoping to be soon able to talk about dentistry again, I wish you happy reading.
Marco