Covid-19 – the last wave

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It seems that in our corner of the world the threat of the pandemic has smothered, at least for now, with lower numbers of new cases being reported every day. This is of course the result of the coordinated efforts of the vaccine campaign, of people understanding the importance of social distancing and unfortunately of the sheer number of people actively immunized by being infected. The latter is estimated by

unofficial sources to be in the millions, outnumbering the doses of vaccines administered in Romania. The scientific community's consensus cannot rule out the occurrence of a fourth wave but even in such an event we could somewhat rest assured based on the experience gained from the first three. There is however a different kind of fourth wave coming illustrated in the image below.

This image was first popularized by M.D. Victor Tseng on Tweeter in March, 30th 2020. The X and Y coordinates are not based on any scientific data as the author himself mentions, it is though the perfect conceptual framework for the health cost projection of the pandemic. In Romania as much as we can see we are recovering from the third wave depicted in this image with hospitals beginning to open toward chronically ill patients.

Addressing the fourth wave of psychic trauma our hospital and university alike, piloted Covid-19 psych support health lines in which professional psychiatry health care workers offered their services to medical students and health care workers affected by the pandemic. These support lines, popularized through the official web pages of the hosting institutions were formed in response to observational data coming from all around the world which indicated that health care workers and students are most prone to experience psychic distress during the pandemic.

The university support line comprised of academics working in the “Socola” Institute of Psychiatry and university psychologists

saw a discrepancy of addressability between psychiatrists and psychologists, in favour of the latter. This preference for psychologists can be explained by at least two factors: the stigma associated with psychiatry and psychologists proximity due to them working within the student campus. Less than one percent of students solicited assessment from one of the psychiatrists included in the program. One might think that this is a good result and consider that it is the outcome of students not developing distress symptoms but this contradicts statistics around the globe stating that between a third and a half of students experienced significant amounts of distress during the pandemic. Of course, not all require professional attendance and not all who solicited support did so through our services but we can’t logically exclude the fact that there is a significant proportion of students who would and can still require psychological support and that through different reasons hesitated in doing so. From what we have seen so far, students who did call for support experienced symptoms ranging from mild anxiety and insomnia to severe depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as depicted in the following chart.

With these results in our minds, we have to move forward and lay out the design of a national response strategy to the so-called Fourth Wave of Psychic Trauma and Mental Illness. The Romanian Health Ministry has already laid down the cornerstone establishing a national psychological support line for people affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The line is staffed by more than 40 volunteer psychotherapists and it is open Monday through Saturday from 12 am to 8 pm.

At “Socola” Institute of Psychiatry there are currently more than one hundred psychiatry residents in training, doctors whose potential is not fully utilized at this time due to the hospital’s strategy in fighting the pandemic. Many feel like time is passing by and that they do not have the proper environment to develop the attributes needed to practice psychiatry. Many wish to

have the ability to practice the caring nature of medicine and to do their part in the fight against the pandemic.

In conclusion, we hereby submit for analysis the possibility of establishing a 24/7 psychological support line staffed by on-call psychiatry residents from every training centre. The service could be included in the mandatory training module entitled Community psychiatry and performed by doctors who have completed the Psychotherapy training module in the third year of residency. Based on international guidelines and by using an agreed upon triage algorithm the residents could offer supportive psychotherapy to those experiencing mild to moderate distress caused by the pandemic and refer those with severe and continuous symptoms to standard mental health consult.