

Courage in the time of coronavirus



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If no one asks, then no one answers
That's how every empire falls.
—John Prine¹

Though discovered in the 1930s, coronaviruses have likely deviled mankind throughout human history, causing diseases ranging from the relatively innocuous common cold to MERS-CoV, which has a mortality rate exceeding 30 percent.² In recent years, human encounters with coronaviruses have spilled from biomedicine into the social and political spheres, summoning physicians to acts of courage that deserve to be more widely known and celebrated throughout the profession.

Physicians at all stages of training need not only knowledge, skill, and experience, but also inspiration, and the stories of the hazards physicians have braved to expose the truth and protect others are truly inspiring.

Jiang Yanyong



Chinese Military surgeon Jiang Yanyong. Photo by Simon Song/South China Morning Post via Getty Images

Born in Hangzhou, China, in 1931, Jiang Yanyong grew up in privilege and decided to study medicine after his aunt died of tuberculosis.³ He joined the army in 1954, and in 1987 became chief surgeon at a military hospital in Beijing. He became known as “Brave Jiang” for his willingness to take on the most difficult surgical cases. Politically, he weathered multiple upheavals, having been branded a rightist at one point and a counterrevolutionary at another.

In late 2002, a previously unknown coronavirus now known as SARS-CoV appeared in China's Guangdong province, near Hong Kong. In January 2003, a fishmonger was admitted to a hospital where more than two dozen health professionals were infected. In February, a hospital staff member attended a wedding in Hong Kong, where many hotel guests were infected. Travelers brought the disease to

Hanoi, Vietnam, and Toronto, Canada, and it soon spread elsewhere, reaching the United States and Europe.

The outbreak was declared contained by the World Health Organization (WHO) in July 2003, with the last cases reported in May of that year. In total, it is estimated that more than 8,000 people were infected, with nearly 800 deaths. Health care workers bore a large portion of the disease burden, accounting for about one-fifth of cases around the world.

Early on, the Chinese government discouraged reporting of the epidemic. Beijing's hospitals had been warned by the government not to speak about it publicly, and official statistics concerning cases underreported its true magnitude.

Yanyong had retired by the time of the epidemic, but he was still in contact with his colleagues. Recognizing that an epidemic was brewing, he wrote an open letter to news organizations in China and Hong Kong.

Yanyong's letter was not reported, but news of it leaked to Western news organizations. He was contacted by reporters from the *Wall Street Journal* and *Time Magazine*, and *Time* soon published the story, “Beijing's SARS Attack,” which featured Yanyong's letter. Other Chinese health professionals and the WHO corroborated his reports. In April 2003, the mayor of Beijing and the minister of public health resigned, and Chinese authorities began aggressive efforts to contain the disease.

Yanyong's courage was not restricted to coronavirus. In 2004, he asked political leaders to re-examine the actions of the Chinese government in the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Reports stated that he and his family had been placed in custody, but he was released several months later. In 2019, he again wrote to China's Communist Party leaders calling for an investigation of events in Tiananmen Square and referring to the government's actions as criminal.

In a 2013 interview, Jiang told a Chinese weekly magazine:

As a physician, protecting patients' health and lives is first and foremost. A physician's most basic duty is to speak the truth. I have experienced numerous political movements for 50 years, and I feel deeply that it is easy to lie, so I insist on never telling lies.⁴

In 2020, it was reported that Yanyong, now nearing 90-years-old, had been under house arrest since 2019. In his letter, he wrote, “Errors committed by our party should be resolved by the party. The sooner this is done and the more thoroughly, the better.”⁴

Carlo Urbani



Carlo Urbani, Italian physician who discovered SARS in Vietnam. Source is a Press Release on the Website of Médecins Sans Frontières Canada <http://www.msf.ca/press/index2003.htm>

Born in Italy in 1956, Carlo Urbani obtained his medical degree in 1981, specializing in infectious diseases and parasitology.⁵ He went to work for a Catholic non-governmental organization in Africa, then joined Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), working in Cambodia. He was active in protests against high pharmaceutical prices for drugs to treat infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and AIDS, and in 1989 joined a delegation of MSF in receiving the Nobel Peace Prize.

Called in 2003 to examine a patient in Hanoi, Urbani suspected that the man was probably suffering a new form

of viral disease. He notified both the Vietnamese government and WHO, which promptly instituted containment measures. Urbani began feeling ill soon after arriving in Bangkok, Thailand and was admitted to a hospital there. He was soon placed on supplemental oxygen, and later, on a ventilator. After requesting last rites, he died in March 2003. Urbani refused to put his own safety ahead of the needs of his patients and the dangers confronting countless others who had not yet become infected. Of Urbani's courageous response to the highly contagious disease, a colleague said, "When people became very concerned in the hospital, he was there every day, collecting samples, talking to the staff and strengthening infection control procedures."⁶ At his insistence, his room in the Hanoi hospital was turned into an isolation unit.

Urbani told his wife, mother of the couple's three children, "If I can't work in such situations, what am I here for? Answering E-mails, going to cocktail parties, and pushing paper?"⁷

After his death, MSF released the statement:

He is remembered as a highly motivated doctor who insisted on remaining an active participant with vulnerable people around the world. We remember his positive attitude and uncompromising support, along with his exceptionally generous nature.⁸

So highly was Urbani regarded by his colleagues that they decided to name the type of coronavirus he identified after him, SARS CoV Urbani. MSF stated, "Because of his early detection of SARS, global surveillance was heightened and many new cases were identified and isolated before they could infect hospital staff."⁸

Li Wenliang



Partially damaged poster of Li Wenliang on wall in China. Courtesy of Petr Vodicka, Wikicommons

Li Wenliang was born in Beizhen, China, in 1986. He attended Wuhan University School of Medicine. After graduation, he trained in ophthalmology, and in 2014 began practicing at Wuhan Central Hospital. In late 2019, he encountered a laboratory report indicating that a patient had tested positive for a SARS coronavirus. He shared with some of his colleagues via social media the news that multiple patients had tested positive for the virus.

When his message, which included a CT scan image of a

patient's lungs, was shared on the Internet, he was summoned by his hospital's leadership and chastised for unauthorized leaking of information. He was persuaded to sign a statement that accused him of disturbing public order. In January 2020, after signing the statement, Wenliang returned to work, but as word of the outbreak spread, he was accused, along with other individuals, of "rumor mongering."

Wenliang complained that he had been chastised for telling the truth. The next month, after it became clear that he was right, the Chinese judiciary issued a statement declaring that he and other individuals should not have been punished for their claims. The court said, "It might have been a fortunate thing if the public had believed the 'rumors' then and started to wear masks, carry out sanitization measures, and avoid the wild animal market," where the outbreak may have originated.

Wenliang later stated that he had been unfairly criticized, saying "I think there should be more than one voice in a healthy society, and I don't approve of using public power for excessive interference."

Wenliang fell ill, likely after treating an infected patient, and was admitted to intensive care. He died in February, but not before he posted a message on social media declaring his intention to return to his medical practice after he recovered.

Both of Wenliang's parents were infected with the coronavirus but recovered. As soon as he fell ill, he moved into a hotel, in an effort to protect his pregnant wife and their son from contracting the disease.

A faculty member at Peking University said of Wenliang:

I deeply mourn for all the medical practitioners passing away in the struggle against this emerging infectious disease, especially Dr. Li Wenliang, as one of the whistleblowers dedicating his young life in the front line. We were encouraged by his dedication to patients and we will continue to fight against the virus to comfort the dead with the final victory.⁹

Regarding Wenliang's contribution, Tom Inglesby at Johns Hopkins University said:

One of the world's most important warning systems for a deadly new outbreak is a doctor's or nurse's recognition that some new disease is emerging and then sounding the alarm. It takes intelligence and courage to step up and say something like that, even in the best of circumstances. Rising doctors and nurses should remember Dr. Li's name for doing the right and brave thing for his community and the world, and should be encouraged to do the same if they are ever in a moment to make that kind of difference in the world.⁹

Courage is not the absence of fear

Both Urbani and Wenliang could be seen as coronavirus martyrs, and Yanyong certainly paid a very heavy price. Today, we use the word *martyr* for someone killed for their beliefs, but it comes from a Latin root that means *witness*. Yanyong, Urbani, and Wenliang were witnesses to new viruses whose virulence they refused to overlook. Rather than withdraw into comfort and safety, they forged ahead on a treacherous course, helping to secure the health of countless people they would never meet.

As the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle argued in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, courage is not the absence of fear.¹⁰ There is good reason to think that Yanyong feared political persecution and incarceration, and that Urbani and Wenliang feared death. What makes a person courageous is the ability to stand firm and carry on in the face of such fear, because the situation calls for it. A truth needed to be recognized and shared, and they were prepared to place everything on the line—even their lives—to secure it a hearing.

Aristotle calls death the most frightening of all things. Yet death is also certain. While not wishing to hasten their own deaths, Yanyong, Urbani, and Wenliang realized what all courageous people intuit—that once we accept its inevitability, the question about death becomes not if but when, how, and why. They confronted their colleagues in medicine with the question, "Is there anything in life so essential that it would warrant placing life itself on the line, and if so, what is it?"

For physicians, this question is answered in service to

others. These courageous physicians were prepared to make great sacrifices for a greater end, and in so doing they bore witness to the higher purpose of the profession of medicine, something every physician needs to be reminded of from time to time.

When armed with courage, even a single physician can prevail against much larger entities that seek to hide the truth and save face. Physician successors to Yanyong, Urbani, and Wenliang are aided by the World Wide Web and other communications media that make it possible to share warnings almost instantaneously. But no communication network, no matter how wide and fast, can ever substitute for the courage of a single human being.

There is an essential ethical dimension to becoming a physician. These three exemplary physicians remind others that at the core of this moral dimension is courage, the willingness to recognize what others will not see, to say what others prefer to leave unsaid, and to take whatever steps are necessary to illuminate the truth.

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