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Thoughts from Staff College.....the fourteenth in our series of Faculty blogs

Vaccines, choices and moral values

Dr Gordon Coutts

So, we probably have a safe and effective vaccine or maybe more than one vaccine. Once again, the clinical research and scientific communities have shown how innovative this extraordinary public-private collaboration can be.

Let me start with a quote from Richard Horton the editor of the Lancet from sixteen years ago *'What are the prospects for human health in a world increasingly threatened by AIDS, terrorism, environmental destruction, and political indifference?'*¹ Today the challenges are not dissimilar; COVID, recent terrorist attacks in France and Austria, climate change and the shenanigans in the White House and Number 10. We are obsessed by who in the UK will receive a vaccine once it is approved. We learnt many things from the AIDS epidemic that have relevance to the COVID pandemic. Extraordinary efforts by the scientific and clinical research communities mean that patients can 'live with AIDS', other lessons were also learnt about the right global approach. Politicians, doctors, ethicists and society will wrestle with who, when and how populations, other than those in the developed and western worlds receive effective and safe vaccines, and at what price. This will involve difficult choices for governments, institutions and medicine. The Lancet quote is from a series called the Trinity Papers and Alkire and Chen concluded *'moral clarity—as well as knowledge and institutional interests—can usefully shape what, when, and how health initiatives should best proceed.'*¹

As senior leaders in health and social care you are frequently faced by exquisitely complex and wicked problems. You make decisions which are not binary, they are more nuanced and rely on moral clarity. You are coming into winter. With the history of recent years, millions on waiting lists and COVID I will not even summon the words 'winter pressures'. This will be a winter unlike any other. There are real challenges of what elective work can be undertaken safely? How effectively can COVID patients be cared for separately from elective patients and with which staff? Choices will need to be made, resources are finite and staff may well be tired. Leaders will have to make the best choice using their medical knowledge, knowledge of themselves, their values and the interests of the wider system as their guides.

Marcus Aurelius, often referred to as the last of the five good Emperors, is reported to have said 'You have power over your mind - not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength'².

Winter will come to an end, the daffodils will flower again and blackbirds will sing in the trees. Difficult choices will need to be made; moral clarity will be needed.

References:

1. [Lancet 2004; 364: 1069–74](#)
2. Aurelius, Marcus: *Meditations*. Translated by Martin Hammond, Penguin Classics, Random House UK, 2014.