

Once again my thoughts are dominated by the one news item: COVID-19. It has permeated every aspect of our lives and, like all major changes, it will shape our language and behaviour. New words and phrases will become commonplace and social customs will shift. Less than 20 years ago, the language and culture of information technology and social media simply did not exist. I can confidently predict the new words and sayings that are rapidly becoming embedded into our everyday parlance: COVID-19, social distancing and “the new normal” to name the obvious ones.

Alongside language, our behaviour and social interactions also evolve; we have seen a move away from socially formal and hierarchical interactions to more informal and familiar, non-hierarchical communications. However, our behaviours are also shaped by major social, political and environmental events – and events, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, have the power to change how whole cultures and societies operate and interact.

A climate of anxiety, suspicion and fear has now developed as a consequence of COVID-19 and our language has developed to reflect it. The very word “pandemic” stirs deep-seated fears associated with the horrors of the Spanish ‘flu pandemic of 1918 and the earlier horrors of the great plague and the black death. All of these were things that society could not control or contain, and did not fully understand, but in which human-to-

THE NEW NORMAL



Sarah May, Deputy Chief Executive of the IBMS, on the pervasive impact the pandemic is having on our lives.

human contact was a significant factor.

As the realities of COVID-19 infiltrate our consciousness and behaviours, the handshake, hug, or kiss on the cheek become regarded with something akin to horror. Door knobs, hand rails and shopping trolleys are all preferably avoided unless wearing gloves, and a bikini wax or eyebrow threading are an absolute no-no. We are all on a steep learning curve that is impacting on every aspect of our lives.

I so much want to be upbeat and encouraging because the incidence and death rates associated with COVID-19 are coming down, but instead I am saddened as we consider a foreseeable future of social avoidance. Humans are, by their very nature, social creatures and the challenges of working and socialising without coming within two metres of

our fellow humans is going to have a big impact on our collective psyche.

I want to end on a lighter note, so am sharing with you a personal incident that shows how times change. It sounds laughable now, but twenty years ago I boarded a plane, in hyper-efficient mode, with two litres of Bolognese sauce in my hand luggage in readiness for dinner that night in a holiday villa. In twenty years time we may laugh at the prospect of travelling without masks and gloves. I do hope not.

Sarah May
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