

This may not be the most scientific of perspectives, but I believe in the therapeutic value of hugs. A hug can be joyful, celebratory, commiserative, intimate or just plain chummy; such a versatile simple act can

convey so much across all ages and all social groups. I therefore watched with absolute horror a recent news item that showed a crematorium official, on the grounds of COVID safety measures, preventing two sons from moving their chairs to comfort their mother during the funeral service for her husband. That tragic little montage was followed by a feeling of profound sadness as I heard the pitiful testimony of an elderly man who had only been able to see his wife through a window of her care home; her dementia prevented her from even beginning to grasp the notion of pandemics and social distancing, and so he watched her slowly forget him through their lack of ability to touch.

COVID-19 has a lot to answer for and I think its emotional legacy will stretch way beyond the physical impact it has had on those who have been infected. The need for social distancing is in direct conflict with our natural instincts and the consequences of its prolonged imposition are seeping into our national psyche, creating a mix of varyingly negative emotions. In times of stress and fear, human-to-human contact provides reassurance; where the sad remains of

A SIMPLE ACT



Sarah May, Deputy Chief Executive of the IBMS, on the emotional legacy of the pandemic and social distancing.

individuals are found in the wake of fatal disaster, they are not in positions that indicate they were trying to keep away from each other. The bodies in the caves at Herculaneum were found huddled together as Vesuvius erupted; the people who died on the Greek cliff edge as they were engulfed in wildfires were found clinging to each other. The final comfort in the midst of fear is human-to-human contact, which is why COVID-19 is so cruel.

I want our December *Biomedical Scientist* edition to end 2020 with a cheerful note, but for now I want to use my last few words here to pay a tribute to the people for whom 2020 has been more than just a catastrophic pandemic but the year in which they have lost someone close to them. I know that this has been the case for some of our members, who do so

much for our profession. The November “Poem for the Month” seems particularly appropriate for our healthcare workforce, some of whom have lost so much while giving so much, and I thought it would be a fitting way to sign off:

“Even the one throwing the lifebelt
Needs help at times.
Stranded on the beach,
Terrified of the waves.”

Sarah May
Deputy Chief Executive



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