

GUEST EDITORIAL

Dear Colleagues

The year 2020 is almost a bygone. What a year it's been for medical science and healthcare! We have all been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, each in our own way. Most congresses have been cancelled and international travel has been curtailed. The implications for societies and medical organisations, not to mention the economies of the whole world, have been monstrous. Amid all this disruption, the Allergy Society of South Africa has not been left untouched.



Wouldn't it be great if we could predict and vaccinate timeously against major health threats such as this novel coronavirus? Well, let us remind you, friends, that every year we face significant numbers of people (including children – unlike COVID-19), who become severely ill from influenza, many of whom die, and yet despite the existence of a very effective vaccine, we as healthcare practitioners and members of the public find any number of excuses not to be vaccinated.

With that background in mind, this issue of *Current Allergy & Clinical Immunology* is devoted to another area in which we as South African health workers are lagging behind in advising our patients: allergy prevention.

Around the world, guidelines are being published suggesting that a number of interventions to prevent allergy are not only possible but highly cost-effective. The costs involved in some prevention interventions are much lower than for interventions were we readily accept therapy. Did you know, for example, that it is an order of magnitude more effective to advocate the use of dietary manipulation to prevent atopic dermatitis than it is to prevent a heart attack with a statin?

So why have we been so slow to recommend this approach in the interests of our patients? It's probably because the advice is often neither clear nor acceptable to the public or health advocates who are more dedicated to saving lives than to preventing morbidity. A case in point is the advice given about weaning infants under six months of age: this contradicts the conventional advice to breastfeed infants exclusively for six months. These pieces of advice are, of course, not contradictory if they are scrutinised with great insight – they simply apply to different risk groups.

So, with this thought in mind, allow us to present to you this issue of our journal, with no fewer than three articles dedicated to aspects of allergy prediction and prevention.

The article with Professor John Warner as first author, summarises the major works currently available on the subject of 'prevention of allergy'. This subject is an expansive and constantly evolving one and consequently no review can ever get to grips fully with all the bits of information emerging. But we encourage you nevertheless to engage with and explore this important topic, one so germane to this issue and to our times.

In addition, Professor André van Niekerk has written a truly remarkable exposé of the burden placed on children when birth is mishandled – in itself an article with a serious undertone in line with our theme of prevention.

Dr Greg Lamb presents his final review of the association between the 'microbiome and the brain'. We have also taken the liberty of asking the journal editors if we may share an inspirational article by Dr Greg Lamb as the 'immunology' piece of this issue. We include this extraordinary article for a number of reasons. For one thing, COVID-19 has taught us some important lessons, the most important of which is that the microbial realm will remain to human beings either of great benefit or it will unleash its wrath as it pleases. The other important lesson in this time of great loss and sorrow for many, is just how important our humanity, our consciousness, has become. We are a species who need one another to survive. We should love more.

The case study included by Dr Lore van Bruwaene, highlights an interesting manifestation associated with COVID-19. We hope this pandemic is reaching its conclusion in South Africa but please continue to wear masks and practice social distancing to keep us all safe.

Clearly central to the allergy-prevention debate is a healthy microbiome, and until we have an artificial probiotic that is effective in restoring gut, lung and skin health, we need to be doing all in our power to protect this most precious human resource. It is our firm belief that, next to climate change and pollution, the dysbiosis of our microbiome is the greatest threat to humanity.

We trust this issue will resonate with you. We also hope that it will inspire you to start in earnest to urge your allergy-prone patients – more especially those prospective parents – to take meaningful steps to mitigate their risk.

Best regards

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