

# A Critique of Coronavirus

*[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

[Sarah Gregory] Hi, I'm Sarah Gregory, and today I'm talking with Dr. Elana Osen, a specialty registrar at St. George's University Hospital in London. We'll be discussing the poem she wrote expressing her feelings about COVID-19.

Welcome, Dr. Osen!

[Elana Osen] Hi! I'm really excited about this, thanks for having me.

[Sarah Gregory] Well, let's get started. What is a registrar in a hospital?

[Elana Osen] So broadly speaking, a registrar is a specialty doctor of approximately equivalent level to a chief resident in the U.S., or potentially a fellow, depending on how far along in one's training one is. I'm a first-year registrar, so I've been a doctor for five years. And in the U.K., it's slightly different than in the U.S. because we have slightly shorter medical school, which lasts for five or six years. And then we have a broader-based training following medical school, and then you enter into specialty training, which is registrar training.

[Sarah Gregory] Interesting. Okay, so what do you do for your job as a registrar?

[Elana Osen] So, my job involves doing lots of different things. Before the coronavirus crisis, it involved doing clinics face to face and operating—I operate with a consultant usually, which is the equivalent of an attending in the U.S.—and I do a variety of elective and emergency work in the operating theater, from operations like tonsillectomies and grommet insertions to emergency operations like tracheostomies and deep space neck infection drainage. That's a normal day-to-day. But I also work on the ward and do on-call shifts. So I have weeks where I'm the registrar on call, and also days where I'm on call overnight from my home.

[Sarah Gregory] So you're a...an ear, nose, and throat specialist. Is that right?

[Elana Osen] Yup. I'm currently doing rhinology and a little bit of head and neck, but my training, more broadly speaking, is in ear, nose, and throat.

[Sarah Gregory] Are you working on COVID-19?

[Elana Osen] So, I work for the National Health Service, and as a result, I am working on COVID-19. It is a national service in the U.K., but the response to the crisis varies locally because of the variation in pressures and the issues that have been caused by coronavirus. For me, I work in a big teaching hospital in London, so we've had comparatively quite a few coronavirus cases. And as part of the coronavirus response, I was actually redeployed to general medicine for six weeks until very recently. I hadn't had a general medical job for more than four years, so that was an interesting experience for me. But I'm now back to doing ear, nose, and throat, which still involves treating COVID-positive patients and potentially positive patients. In particular, the ENT surgery department has been doing tracheostomy and airway management for the coronavirus patients, and I've been involved in doing that, as well, when...since my redeployment to...back to ENT.

[Sarah Gregory] What inspired you to write this poem?

[Elana Osen] I was actually at work when I wrote it, during a relatively quiet on-call at the beginning of the coronavirus period. And it was an unusually quiet on call, and I was thinking

about how easy everything seems to be despite the fact that we were in a...in the midst of a pandemic. I had arrived at work via a very relaxed cycling commute where there was no traffic. The weather was nice, which was very unusual for London in March, and it was all very different to what we had all imagined it would be. In the hospital, we had been briefed and we had been doing simulations that were suggesting that we'd be practicing battlefield medicine and be on a constant war footing with adrenaline carrying all of us from one critically ill patient to the next, and that we'd be surrounded by death and decay and destruction. And clearly there will be areas of exception where that is akin to what's happening. But I think for most people, the reality of living through the pandemic, as a doctor or otherwise, is very different to that.

And clearly the specifics of the situation will vary country to country and location to location, even within a country. And lockdown will look very different in different places. I was responding to how things were in the U.K., but I think that what we're experiencing is similar to what a lot of other people are experiencing. In the U.K., we've had a lot of rhetoric about medical professionals being heroes and a lot of propaganda that's reminiscent of the blimp propaganda during World War II. But for all of the talk of the "invisible mugger," as our prime minister put it, there are actually no villains to fight or bombs falling. My generation has been raised on super HD/CGI superhero films, and the baby boomers in the U.S. might remember the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam in the Cold War. And before then, the greatest generation will have experiences of the Second World War.

And even in medieval and ancient times, plagues didn't behave like this one is doing. Everyone should be familiar with the Black Death and bubonic plague, but even other epidemics and pandemics—like the anthrax epidemic in the early second century—ravaged the population and left people disfigured and missing lumps of flesh. So, this new paradigm where we're faced with a silent killer that can even be infecting people asymptotically and behave not unlike the common cold or the flu for many people is new and incredibly disconcerting. And the dichotomy between expectation of what a plague or a pandemic should be like, and the observable reality is jarring and confusing. I felt the experience of looking around and not seeing or sensing anything observably different from normal, whilst at the same time being in the midst of a pandemic, was possibly fairly universal. So, I wrote a poem about it.

[Sarah Gregory] Have you written other poems?

[Elana Osen] I've always been writing and I have been writing poems for a long time, and I do other creative writing as well, like writing flash fiction for example. But I only recently started publishing my poems, for a variety of reasons, one of which is that, obviously, poetry is quite emotive and personal. My most recent poem in the public scale is one called "Prayer to a Parasite," which is in the January issue of the *Journal of Medical Humanities*. I think if...if you like "A Critique of Coronavirus," which is my poem for the *Emerging Infectious Diseases* journal, then you may well like "Prayer to a Parasite"—you can tell I'm a fan of alliterative titles, I suppose—and that's available online. I'm also writing a collection of coronavirus poems of varying lengths. They're all not very serious, some are much more jovial and flippant, because this has been going on for a while and it will be with us for a while, and there are many different facets to the experience of it.

[Sarah Gregory] Okay, so what are you doing to relax besides writing poetry?

[Elana Osen] Well, I don't know if writing poetry is always that relaxing. But it's...it's difficult to relax at this moment in time because everything is very different and strange. I would usually

play Eton fives, which is a doubles handball game—a little like squash, but with obstacles on the court—though I don't believe it's played in the U.S. or in America. But we're not allowed to play that here because of social distancing and lockdown, so I'm not doing that. And I obviously can't see my family in person because of the lockdown. So, I'm mainly just doing things that normal people do most of the time, like watching films and reading books and cycling, doing a bit of writing, obviously, decorating my flat—nothing very exciting.

[Sarah Gregory] Cooking? Are you cooking? That's what I've been doing, tons of cooking.

[Elana Osen] I am not a talented cook, but I have been making some food. I'm surviving.

[Sarah Gregory] Okay, well why don't you go ahead and read us your poem then?

[Elana Osen] Sure. So my poem is called “A Critique of Coronavirus.”

Why did the quiet descend?

Does this plague not know

that apocalypses come with fanfare,

wails of lamentation,

howls of wayward dogs,

explosive blasts?

Or, maybe, silence.

Just shop-window glass crunching underfoot

puncturing the eerie nothing.

Not quiet.

Never quiet.

Why does the sun still shine?

Can it not see what transpires

from its lofty throne

above the Earth?

Read the room, sun.

Now's the time for greyscale filter.

Or, maybe, an eclipse.

One last blinding ray of blazing flare

to scorch the land,

to boil the sea,

to serve up *des hommes brûlés*

to whichever vengeful deity

dines with us tonight.

Not sunshine.  
Never sunshine.  
Why can I smell the tulips?  
I thought the virus  
wiped olfaction from our  
paltry list of powers?  
Or, maybe, smoke.  
You know, from voracious flames  
feasting on our foliage and flesh,  
the smog of industry,  
of mushroom clouds.  
Why does that not sting my nostrils?  
Not flowers.  
Never flowers.  
Why does life go on inexorably?  
Is Ragnarök not supposed to happen  
around now?  
Where are the horsemen?  
Where are the double gates of Paradise?  
What a lame apocalypse:  
we've been sold a lemon.  
Or, maybe, pop culture eschatology  
isn't all it is cracked up to be.  
I thought the zombies would be roaming  
all my haunts  
by now.  
Not life.  
Never life.

[Sarah Gregory] Well, that certainly is a very interesting poem and evocative and you read it wonderfully.

[Elana Osen] Thanks!

[Sarah Gregory] And thank you so much for taking the time to read it, Dr. Osen!

[Elana Osen] You are very welcome, I hope everyone enjoys it.

[Sarah Gregory] And thanks for joining me out there. You can read the July 2020 Another Dimension article, A Critique of Coronavirus, online at [cdc.gov/eid](https://www.cdc.gov/eid).

I'm Sarah Gregory for *Emerging Infectious Diseases*.

*[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit [cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov) or call 1-800-CDC-INFO*