



Physical distancing or social distancing: that is the question

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Received: 25 April 2020 / Revised: 26 April 2020 / Accepted: 27 April 2020 / Published online: 11 May 2020
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To the Editor,

We read with great interest the article entitled “Social distancing: implications for the operating room in the face of COVID-19” recently published in the *Journal*.¹ Until improved surveillance and a vaccine become available, the best way to prevent the disease from spreading is to keep people physically away from each other by at least two metres.

In the interim, the effect of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on mental health is increasingly becoming a global concern.² The impact of COVID-19 on mental health is also influenced by the increasing use of social media. Managing the “infodemic”³ includes filtering out the expansive false information about the COVID-19 outbreak, and in some respects is just as important as fighting the pandemic itself.⁴ Nevertheless, social media can also have a positive effect by bringing people socially closer to each other while still maintaining physical distancing. It is a strategy that may be able to overcome the psychologic effects of the crisis in the long run. This

approach needs public education and revising the culture of using social media. In addition to all the advice given to preventing the negative psychologic consequences of the disease, it should be emphasized that distancing oneself from others does not mean being emotionally or socially distant. Maintaining connections with others is essential for our mental and physical health, and for this purpose, social media is a unique tool.⁵ This kind of connection needs social closeness that cannot be provided by social distancing.

The current distancing guidelines are the first time mental health has been a concern. There are many studies that confirm the impact of social distancing on mental health, particularly if it results in social isolation.³ Although the definition of social distancing in current distancing guidelines refers to the physical aspect,¹ it is feared that in the long term, forgetting this concept will lead to human error and social isolation. Therefore, it seems that instead of using the term “social distancing”, it is better for us to use “physical distancing” to make it clear that it is necessary to maintain and promote social closeness now more than ever to protect the mental health of our community.

This letter is accompanied by a reply. Please see Can J Anesth 2020; this issue.

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Conflicts of interest None.

Funding statement None.

Editorial responsibility This submission was handled by Dr. Hilary P. Grocott, Editor-in-Chief, *Canadian Journal of Anesthesia*.

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