

Symposium “New Coronavirus from China: Biosecurity Threat and Challenge for Healthcare Professionals”

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The symposium “New Coronavirus from China: Biosecurity Threat and Challenge for Health Care Professionals” was held at the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, on February 14, 2020. In late 2019, a severe respiratory infection caused by SARS-CoV-2 started to spread rapidly, resulting in high morbidity and mortality rates in Wuhan, China, and continued to spread even faster worldwide, causing immeasurable health and economic challenges.

The goal of this symposium, organized by the Croatian Society for Biosafety and Biosecurity in cooperation with the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases “Dr. Fran Mihaljević”, Zagreb, was to gather a large number of experts in the field of biosafety, infectious diseases, microbiology, epidemiology, molecular biology, as well as other health experts to discuss current possibilities in the treatment, diagnosis and prevention of the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Due to the exceptional interest in the symposium, it was organized simultaneously in the large hall of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the Library of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, which were linked by a video link. However, the interest in the symposium exceeded the capacity of these two conference rooms, thus the entire symposium was broadcasted live on YouTube. The symposium was also recorded, which enabled future watching both on YouTube and on the websites of the Croatian Society for Biosafety and Biosecurity, the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts and the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases “Dr. Fran Mihaljević”.

Speeches at the symposium were held by leading experts in the field. First, the director of the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases “Dr. Fran Mihaljević”, professor Alemka Markotić reminded the participants of the causes and consequences of previous dangerous infectious diseases epidemics and pandemics, from plague in the Middle Ages to Ebola in the 21st century. Academician Josip Madić spoke about coronaviruses in veterinary medicine, while

professor Antoinette Kaić Rak, Head of the World Health Organization Office in the Republic of Croatia, spoke about the new coronavirus as a global threat.

The Minister of Health, Vili Beroš, was also a speaker at the symposium, reporting on the results of the meeting of the Ministers of Health of the European Union countries held on February 13 in Brussels. Professor Beroš convened the meeting as minister of health, as Croatia is currently holding the presidency of the Council of the European Union. The main goal of the meeting was to ensure better coordination of measures to combat the threat of coronavirus spread. The meeting pointed out possible issues in the procurement of medicines and medical equipment from China. Minister Beroš expressed satisfaction that such a meeting was organized in a short time, emphasizing that it is a success of Croatian diplomacy.

Bernard Kaić, MD, PhD, Head of the Infectious Diseases Epidemiology Service at the Croatian Institute of Public Health presented the epidemiological features of the recent coronaviruses causing severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) and the new coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2. The clinical features of the COVID-19 were described by assistant professor Rok Čivljak, Deputy Director of the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases “Dr. Fran Mihaljević”. Assistant professor Marko Kutleša, Head of the Department of Intensive Care Medicine and Neuroinfectology, at the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases “Dr. Fran Mihaljević” covered the treatment of patients with severe respiratory infections admitted in the intensive care unit. Ivan Christian Kurolt, PhD from the University Hospital for Infectious Diseases “Dr. Fran Mihaljević”, who established positive reverse transcriptase quantitative polymerase chain reaction (RT-qPCR) nucleic acid test for SARS CoV-2 in late January, and head of the Biosafety Level-3 (BSL-3) laboratory gave a speech about the molecular diagnosis of the new coronavirus. Dr. Kurolt. The first case of COVID-19 in Croatia was confirmed on February 25. Over the next two weeks, sporadic COVID-19 cases were reported, after which the number of new cases recorded per day gradually increased. Measures taken to limit and prevent the spread of SARS-CoV-2, prompt diagnosis and treatment of COVID-19 patients, have ranked Croatia among the world’s top countries that have so far successfully fought this dangerous pandemic.

