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Capturing pandemic days in an ICU through the lens of a camera

Raw, real and brutal images in black and white, showing health care staff giving everything to save lives during a pandemic. This is Dana Yamini's and his co-workers strong legacy for posterity.

Being a specialist nurse for more than 30 years, Dana Yamini has come across both catastrophes and tragedies in the intensive care unit (ICU). But the severity of COVID-19, he finds incomparable to anything else.

"When I arrived at work one of those first traumatic days, I almost couldn't get through the crowded hallways. I passed a ward with ten people wearing masks and protective gear as they were trying to revive a patient. When I reached the ICU I realized that overnight, 12 patients had turned into 40."

Dana looked back into the hallway; all he could see was heads, heads, heads everywhere. He got a strong feeling that this was something he would remember for the rest of his life, so he grabbed his mobile phone and took a photo to document the chaos.

"The idea was born already there. I had been doing photography for many years with a diploma from New York Institute of Photography, and I got an instant feeling that this was unique, something that would affect us for the rest of our lives. I wanted to capture the history of our time."

With the approval from his employer, Dana started to document the new reality at Södersjukhuset in Stockholm, Sweden, where he and his colleagues were struggling to cope with the pandemic.

"Never before had we seen anything like this. In the very beginning, even if we could do some presumptions, we did not know what we were up against. The status of a COVID-19 patient can change from stable to life-threatening in just seconds. We did not dare to turn our heads around."

Dana started looking into war photography on his own and found parallels; in some means he and his colleagues were at war against the new, dangerous virus that left death and destruction around them.

They worked long shifts and Dana came to work earlier and left later than he should to get more time with the camera.

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"People called for me when there were situations they thought would be important to document. It was hectic to clean up, change equipment and wards back and forth as well as being both nurse and photographer. But I did not hesitate; health care staff around the world are doing more tremendous efforts than ever before in our lifetime and we need this to be remembered."

The result of Dana's work has turned into an album and a book, consisting of black and white images.

"By avoiding colors I want to remove all potential beauty. The photos are raw, real and brutal. We are tired, beaten and the pandemic has left many traces of mental problems. In that sense I also hope the photos can work as a reminder that we are in this together, we are not alone."

Dana, along with other health care workers around the world, are battling long hours on the frontline in extreme conditions and keep doing it.

"This is not over. We know more about the COVID-19 patients today than we did in the very beginning, but every day still bring new challenges and insights. I am glad to be part of saving lives and will continue to document the time we live, together we will continue build on this legacy."

One of the photos from Dana's book is featured on the cover of Getinge's Annual Report. 2020, a year that changed life as we knew it.

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