

## **10 Minutes With Prof. Marianna Arvanitakis, The Winner Of The European Award For The Best Medical Practice In The COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Introduction**

For this interview, Professor Marianna Arvanitakis was invited to explain her leadership role during the pandemic response and direct the efforts to combat the pandemic. She has been recognized and awarded for outstanding medical practices, highlighting their impact on patients and healthcare systems, and inspiring others to strive for excellence in healthcare delivery, even in challenging times essential for the lesson learned in Global health diplomacy and future emergency preparedness.

### **Biography:**

Marianna Arvanitakis finished her medical degree in 1997 in Brussels, Université Libre de Bruxelles, and pursued her fellowship in Internal Medicine/Gastroenterology. She has been working in the Erasme University Hospital since 2002, where she has a position of full professor since 2018. She is head of the Clinic of Pancreatology and Clinical Nutrition.

She presented a PhD thesis focused on diagnosis and treatment of pancreatic diseases in 2007. Her main clinical and research interest are pancreatic diseases, clinical nutrition, training and therapeutic endoscopy, with 160 cited publications.

She has an active role in the European Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ESGE) Governing Board as the individual member representative since 2014, the chair of the Education Committee since 2018, is currently the scientific committee chair involved in the organization of the ESGE days and was elected as ESGE treasurer from 2023. She was involved in the United European Gastroenterology (UEG), the European Society of Enteral and Parenteral Nutrition (ESPEN), the American Gastroenterology Association (AGA) and the American Society of Gastrointestinal Endoscopy (ASGE). In 2021, she received the European Award for the Best Medical Practice in the COVID-19 pandemic as an honored medical professional who has gone above and beyond to provide care and support to her patients during the pandemic with significant contributions and efforts that have influenced positive change in the COVID 19 pandemic.



- **What are the key leadership messages you want to get out to the *Global Bioethics Enquiry* readership?**

The key message I would like to convey is to valorise your co-workers by identifying their strong points, giving them tasks they can accomplish, and empowering them. Not only the overall project will advance, but each individual can develop self-confidence and further maximize their potential.

- **Tell us a little bit about your leadership role and how it is changing as a result of the pandemic?**

As the head of Clinical Nutrition Team, my group and myself had the challenge to deal with many patients who were extremely malnourished after a long illness due to COVID during the first wave. Despite the demanding nature of the task, this endeavour strengthened the bonds within the team, helped in finding solutions and standardising pre-existing protocols. It also boosted clinical research by involving health care professionals from all disciplines (doctors, nurses, dieticians.).

- **What events in your past experience are most informing your leadership in this pandemic?**

Apart from being responsible of the Clinical Nutrition team, I am also performing therapeutic endoscopy. This activity involves adding up different aspects of the patients' situation, having technical dexterity, working smoothly with a team, making fast decisions, and managing emergencies by prioritizing. My involvement in the endoscopy ward gave me confidence and enthusiasm to promote new projects in other activities and even in more challenging situations, such as the pandemic we went through.

- **What are you finding the biggest challenges?**

The biggest challenge is enabling communication between members of the team, as well as between the team and other clinical or administrative structures within the hospital. Making fair choices and simultaneously protecting your team may be a difficult task.

In a more global level, challenges are numerous. Despite that the worse part of the pandemic is over, health care systems and hospitals are currently going through a major crisis. Increased expenses, inflation and shortage of health care workers have serious implications on maintaining adequate and equitable health care provision. Indeed, backlogs for surgery, imaging and diagnostic services are growing and this can lead to irreversible damage for patients (1). This crisis has also impact on research and developing innovative techniques. Finally, climate change, which is one of the undeniable challenges of our decade, has consequences on human health, the practice of medicine and stability of health care systems (2).

- **Any particular surprises?**

I was already used to working out of traditional office hours but with the pandemic we got used to longer working times, continuing during the weekends and also vacations. The “always connected” syndrome became a way of life. Nevertheless, it is important to find ways of letting go the steam.

- **Are you seeing any behaviours from colleagues that encourage or inspire you?**

I have the opportunity of working with many non-medical health care providers (nurses, pharmacists, dieticians...). I am always impressed not only by their accurate clinical evaluation in everyday practice but also by their enthusiasm to engage in new projects.

- **How are you maintaining kindness and compassion?**

It is important to maintain empathy when dealing with patients; it is also the only way to sustain our own humanity as physicians. I tend to put myself in the patient’s situation and ask myself “What would I have done if this was my mother? My son? My spouse?”. This approach may lack objectivity but helps in keeping the human factor in perspective.

- **Are there any ideas or readings that you find helpful, for inspiration and support, which you would recommend to others?**

“When breath becomes air” is a non-fiction auto biographical book written by neurosurgeon Dr Paul Kalanithi, who was diagnosed with metastatic lung cancer at the end of his residency (3). Beyond the questions that come up regarding what makes life worth living, the book is a poignant testimony on the relationship between doctor and patient, especially when confronted to death. Reading the book helps put things in perspective, regarding our work with our patients, but also in the private sphere.

- **What are you looking for from your leaders?**

I believe a leader should be generous, inclusive and be able to adapt by accepting and initiating change.

## REFERENCES

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**External link:** <https://patientombudsman.eu/patient-ombudsman-award-for-the-best-medical-practice-in-the-covid-19-pandemic/>