

Editorial**LIVING IN “INTERESTING TIMES”****Beverley Kramer**

*Emeritus Professor, University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa
Member of the Editorial Board, Argentine Journal of Clinical Anatomy
President, International Federation of Associations of Anatomists*



Robert (Bobby) F. Kennedy, a US Senator and brother of President John F Kennedy, in a thought-provoking “Day of Affirmation” speech delivered at the University of Cape Town, South Africa on June 6, 1966 to celebrate liberty, said: *“There is a Chinese curse which says ‘May he live in interesting times’. Like it or not we live in interesting times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind”.*

As the daughter of parents who fled the Holocaust to make a better life, and after the staggering and shocking tales of the second World War, I truly believed that the world was becoming a better place in the 21st Century. However, there is no doubt that for the past few years we have all been living in *“interesting times”*.

We were stunned by the appearance of a devastating virus, SARS-COVID-19, in November 2019 which went on to become a large cluster in Wuhan, China by December 2019. While the origin of the virus is still not known, it has overwhelmed populations and decimated communities. Now with over 446 million people having been infected and more than 6 million globally having died from the virus, it is not yet over. In addition to the terrible loss of life and suffering caused by the virus, its impact has infiltrated every level of our lives, isolating people from their families, locking out normal social interactions and causing upheavals for children and young adults at schools and universities, as well as lasting deleterious economic effects. It will surely be a long time until we return to the “normal” classroom, the “normal” office and to “normal” unrestricted socialising. Man is a social animal and isolation has had a major impact on mental health and societal well-being.

And then, while the world watched, the Ukraine was invaded in February 2022 and war returned to Europe. Daily, we were horrified and shocked at the devastation and violence caused by the war, by the loss of life and limb, by the destruction of homes and hospitals and the scenes of millions of refugees struggling as they had to leave their country. While we have sadly seen these events unfolding many times before in our lifetimes, in Syria, in Iraq, in Afghanistan, Myanmar, Sudan, Somalia and Ethiopia, the list is endless, the spectre of a third World War has hung heavily as a pall over what once before seemed to be a relatively “peaceful” world.

Not only was the 20th Century responsible for a number of horrifying episodes (eg. Stalin’s

Gulags, Hitler’s Holocaust, Cambodia’s killing fields), it also gave rise to an explosion of exceptional scientific discoveries and inventions which changed science and the world. To name a few of these discoveries: In 1923, the nature of galaxies was established (Hubble); in 1925, Dart described *Australopithecus africanus*; Fleming discovered penicillin in 1928; in 1936, the discovery of the neutron was announced (Chadwick); the structure of DNA was revealed in 1953 (Watson and Crick); 1973 saw the invention of magnetic resonance imaging (Lauterbur); in 1985, the ozone hole was discovered (Farman et al.) and in 1997, Dolly the sheep was produced by cloning (Wilmot et al.). We should not only learn from the negative impacts of the past, but also focus on the hugely positive outcomes that

scientists can make as we advance into the future.

As scientists and clinicians, our emotions and academic experiences generally lead us to build, cure, nurture and explore. Thus, while strongly condemning the negative events of the 21st Century (the Coronavirus pandemic, global warming and climate change, the growing poverty, hunger and inequality, the recent invasion of the Ukraine), we must continue the work of science. We must use science to alleviate the miseries of our time. More than half a century after Robert Kennedy’s speech in Cape Town, we are sadly still living in “interesting times”. This should however, not deter us from deploring evil, putting an end to animosity and finding innovative ways to work for peace and the advancement of all humanity.