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HELLO 194? THIS IS COVID-19 CALLING!

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The emergency call center (ECC) is the first link of the chain of survival [1] and the heart of the entire pre-hospital segment of the health care system (HCS). Following the decision to declare a state of emergency

(SE) in Serbia due to the COVID-19 pandemic [2], CC 194 in Belgrade ECC was fully in the service of the SE and recommended instructions of the Ministry of Health (MH) of the Republic of Serbia. In addition to regular activities in the ECC, through a direct telephone line the so-called COVID-19 lines, operators answered phone calls related to coronavirus infection. The calls focused on informing the caller on the symptoms of this disease, the ways of referring suspected COVID-19 patients to epidemiological service (ES), medical examinations in established COVID-19 stations within referring health centers, providing psychological support and phone numbers of ES and COVID-19 clinics. After the triage and in case of need, the COVID-19 line operator would redirect the callers to activate the ambulance team of 194 number, equipped with the personal protective equipment, to examine and transport the patient suspected of COVID-19 to the COVID hospital.

We presents the number of connections made on the COVID-19 line in Belgrade, a city with nearly 2 million inhabitants, during the SE in the period from February 15 to April 6, 2020 (Figure 1).

In the graph displayed peaks with the maximum number of calls on 11 April (1200 calls) and minimum number of calls (28 calls) on 2 May 2020. The number of calls is more frequent the day than during the night (9675 vs 6364), with the same peaks of maximum and minimum number of calls as in the total number of calls.

This way of reorganizing the CC enabled relieving the 194 line for other emergencies [3]. The primary objective was for operators to remain accessible and

functional, regardless of the epidemic situation, to answer all emergency phone calls at any moment within the ideal timeframe of 10 s.

A similar way of reorganizing the ECC was shown by authors from Lausanne [1]. "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic," said Director-General of the WHO at a gathering of foreign policy and security experts in Munich on 15 February 2020 [4].

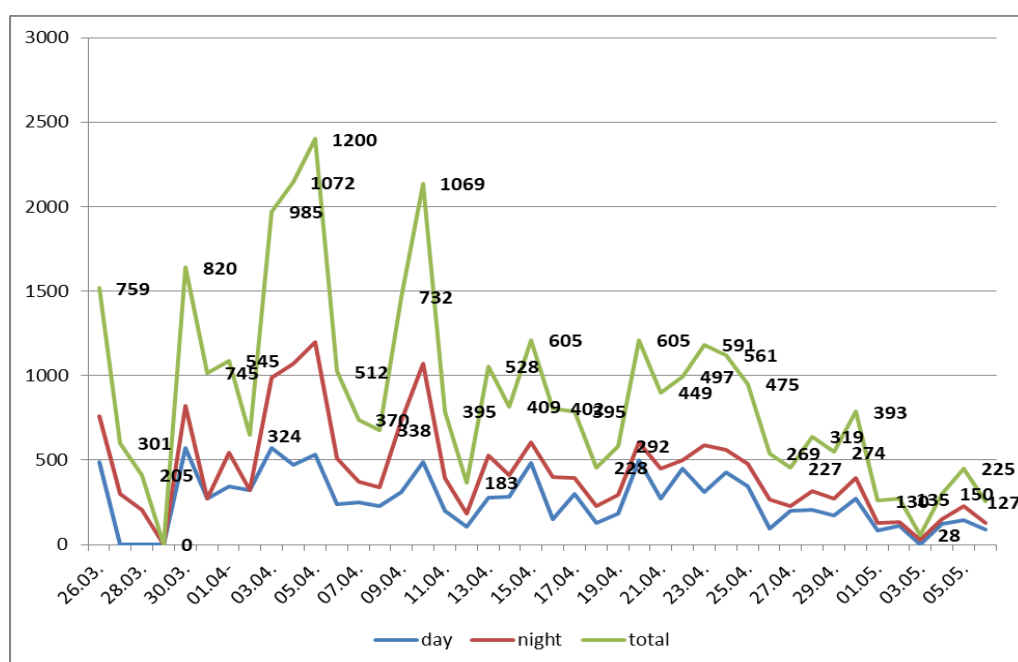


Figure 1. Distribution of connections on COVID-19 phone line during the SE in Serbia

Inaccurate information and various conspiracy theories on social networks and in the media have caused additional problems and burdens on the HCS. This was all the more reason to provide reliable information to the citizens at any moment by providing a direct COVID-19 line – information. There may be no way to prevent a COVID-19 pandemic, but verified information is the most effective prevention against the spread of panic [5].

During this pandemic, our ECC have taken on a huge role in serving and caring for the population. The reorganization of the ECC allowed to maintain acceptable response times despite the abrupt increase of the number of calls [3].

Works of this type are desirable for the purpose of exchanging information from various world ECC on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic [3,6] and making national and international recommendations for proper action.

Conflict of interest: the authors state that there is no conflict of interest.

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