Preparing for public health emergencies is an ongoing process and involves a variety of approaches and tools. Tabletop exercises are one of the tools designed to simulate the emergence of a public health emergency and address some or all of the phases of emergency management: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. They typically are designed to include participation of stakeholders from diverse and complementary backgrounds, including command, operations, logistics, planning, and finance. Effective tabletop exercises provide a plausible scenario that require cooperation and communication from these functional areas. Tabletops also require forward thinking and planning in a variety of scenarios. When a public health emergency occurs, decision makers may be overwhelmed with decisions that need their immediate attention. Tabletop exercises can provide a framework to help decision makers anticipate future challenges, which may provide the mental model encompassing knowledge and insights that inform both current and future decisions.

Dr. Li Wenliang, a 34-year-old ophthalmologist in Wuhan, first alerted his medical school classmates on December 30, 2019 of a SARS-like virus. He was quickly silenced three days later as he was detained by the local police and agreed to “stop the illegal behavior” of spreading “rumors.” In his interview with the New York Times on January 31 and February 1, 2020, a few days before his death, he indicated that he was infected by a patient whom he was treating for glaucoma and became concerned as the patient had infected her family. The patient was asymptomatic at the time so Dr. Li did not take protective measures. He also reported that there had already been other patients under quarantine for symptoms resembling pneumonia and there were discussions among his colleagues to take precautions. Dr. Li began showing symptoms on January 10th and died on Friday, February 7, 2020. He advocated for more transparency during his New York Times interview and believed that the epidemic would have been better controlled had information been disseminated earlier. His death unleashed an outpouring of anger and grief in social media as well as demands for freedom of speech in China. Moreover, Dr. Li’s death exposed a “troubling aspect of the epidemic that goes unmentioned in official statistics: the number of doctors, nurses, and medical workers infected by the virus.” Hundreds of health care workers may have been infected in Wuhan, according to government data; an anecdotal report noted a single patient had infected 14 health care workers at one hospital.

This novel coronavirus was later named SARS-CoV-2 and the disease it causes is COVID-19. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the outbreak to be a public health emergency of international concern and on March 11, 2020, WHO designated the outbreak as a pandemic. At the time of this writing, SARS-CoV-2 had spread to all 6 inhabited continents across 123 countries, caused more than 126,000 reported cases of disease, and more than 4,633 reported deaths. The emergence of this novel coronavirus appears to be overwhelming a number of countries, has the potential to reach every country, and will test the infrastructure of many governments, institutions, and businesses. While tabletop exercises have been published in preparation for pandemic influenza, to our knowledge, no tabletop exercises specific to the COVID-19 have been developed for universities or similar size institutions. WHO has made a COVID-19-related tabletop available on their website, but its target
acting in emergency response roles may adapt and implement this manual to facilitate effective communication among participating agencies and personnel, and disseminate information to the community to fully achieve the aims of emergency response.

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