

COVID-19 PANDEMIC: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE THROUGH A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic has caused substantial overt and covert damage in terms of mortality, morbidity, and socioeconomic losses. This adversity has provided healthcare professionals with an opportunity to examine worldwide patterns and inadequacies in order to develop appropriate strategies for anticipating, preventing, detecting, and managing such disasters in the future. It has also provided the world with a unique opportunity to explore the patterns of the global inequalities. Some of the positive effects of the pandemic are highlighted and food for thought presented to the global scientific community to permit a focus on assessing the impact on other aspects, too. It is imperative to note that many developing countries, like Pakistan, were able to tackle the problem effectively through their national organisations. There is a need to ensure perpetuation of the services of these agencies, even as the pandemic recedes. The experience and lessons of monitoring, evaluation and data collection capabilities are of immense importance with regard to planning, utilising resources and mitigating outcomes of similar or different situations. The experiences gained can serve as a basis for the development of disease registries, community-based prevalence studies, particularly mental disorders, to permit development of a variety of public health strategies.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19, Developing Countries, Disasters, Pandemics, Public Health, Socioeconomic Factors

The Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) has globally caused massive overt and covert damage (i.e., mortality, morbidity, and socioeconomic losses). This pandemic has produced an unprecedented burden on the global economy, education/academics, health, travel, sports events, food supply chains and production, etc. In addition, a fact not taken into account is the impact on psychosocial domains, at individual, community, county, regional and global levels.¹

This adversity has provided an opportunity to examine worldwide patterns and inadequacies in order to develop appropriate strategies for anticipating, preventing, detecting, and managing such pandemics in the future. It is also an excellent time to reflect on the beneficial aspects of this massive pandemic and to 'think globally while acting locally'.

Following are some of the positive consequences of COVID-19:

1. Decline in pollution due to decreased transportation and air travel

Pollution because of transportation is a serious threat to the global environment. Particulate matter (PM), ozone, nitrogen oxide, sulphur dioxide, etc. are among the known risk factors for a variety of illnesses. The COVID-19 restrictions, confinements, and reduction in almost all forms of travels led to a significant decrease in road and air traffic, leading to decreased levels of air pollution. Confinements and lockdowns reduced the levels of exposure to nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter levels (which are linked with an increased incidence of lung cancer) by about 60%.²

2. Holistic thinking of the world: taking care of each other at individual, national and global levels

The COVID-19 'infodemic' caused by electronic and print media seriously shook the confidence and trust in authorities, scientific communities, governments, institutions and particularly in doctors, which led to poor mental health and

behaviours. Communities were reluctant to believe in the gravity of the pandemic or the preventive measures proposed. Conspiracy theories and suspicion were rife and had a serious impact on mental health at individual and collective levels. Public apprehension and skepticism are linked to crises in socio-political relations, whether at the national, regional, or global levels. It is therefore critical to have a comprehensive, transdisciplinary, integrative understanding of these dynamics, as well as evidence-based treatment and prevention.³

The pandemic has drawn attention to issues of global and holistic perception and thinking of the world and the need of reducing inequity in term of basic needs, education, health facilities, etc. It has caused the world to think anew about the need to reduce these inequities on a priority basis. There is a dire need that the developed countries should not ignore, that is to help the Low and Middle-Income Countries in their own interest if pandemics are to be restricted. A simple strategy is to overcome the malnourishment and nutritional deficiencies that prevail; 85% of the overweight world population can be educated and motivated to consume less and share with others by ingesting fewer calories and obviating the need for vigorous exercise to reduce weight.

3. Rise of technology- the digital flood

Due to social distancing and lockdowns recommended, the Covid-19 pandemic has inevitably resulted in an increase in the use of digital technologies. People and organisations worldwide have had to adapt to new ways of working and living, which has resulted in a global surge of digital connectivity that is not likely to fade.⁴

Internet service usage has increased from 40% to 100% in comparison to the pre-lockdown levels. Video-conferencing applications such as Zoom has seen a tenfold increase in usage, while Content Delivery Soft-ware like the Akamai application increased by 30%.⁵



When teaching and training ceased due to the COVID-19 burden and consequences, a series of e-Mental Health Webinars were initiated by the Author as Dean, College of Physicians Surgeon Pakistan and the President of Pakistan Psychiatric Society on 15 April 2022. This was formulated to overcome the Teaching and Training gap in Psychiatry.⁶ These initiatives were followed by a series of webinars by local and international mental health professionals.

3. Importance of Mental health

Along with the health impacts of the disease, COVID-19 has led to, self and so-called social distancing (which is in fact physical distancing), disconnection from family and friends, quarantine etc. leading to coronaphobia⁷ and touch deprivation besides insomnia, acute stress, anxiety, depression, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This has resulted in a realisation in general of the significant importance of mental health.

While much of the focus of the pandemic was on physical health, COVID-19 also took a serious toll on the mental health of the world's population.⁸ A high prevalence of poor well-being (41.2%) was found among the Pakistani general population with risk factors of female gender, unemployment, fears, chronic illnesses, and absence of coping strategies.⁹

4. Learning and Research opportunities

Primarily, healthcare learning has been supported through a variety of on-campus activities that include in-person interactions between students and peers, as well as practical learning. For ages, health-care professionals have been taught by observing and learning from experienced clinical practitioners using hands-on learning.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on learning opportunities, particularly those involving large groups or in-person interaction with peers and patients. A large portion of the curriculum has been modified to an online format, with yet to be known long-term consequences. This different format is likely to have an effect on learning didactics, affecting both students and teachers.¹⁰

Despite the evident dire outcomes of COVID-19, the intelligentsia have called for efforts to identify innovative opportunities for sustainable development. There are numerous potential opportunities in the context of multi-disciplinary and international research projects.¹¹

3. Economic development

In recent years, the world economy has faced numerous crises, but none has been as truly universal in terms of reach, impact, and visibility as this pandemic. More than ever in human history, all mankind is focused on the same threat, and everyone is reliant on the same global solutions: vaccines, physical distancing, and the necessity of maintaining an open global economy. The present deeply interconnected global economy contributes to the problem by making it easier for shocks like COVID-19 to resound, influence and intensify around the world; however, it can also contribute to the solution by making it easier to mobilise the economic and technological resources required to respond to these jolts when they occur, and contributing towards economic resilience.

The pandemic encouraged the continuity of essential services, such as the food chain, public utilities, and the manufacture of medical supplies, locally. Private companies provided expertise and innovation to scale and sustain the response, most notably through the production and equitable distribution of laboratory diagnostics, personal protective equipment, ventilators, medical oxygen and other essential medical equipment at fair prices. The research and development of diagnostic tests, treatments and vaccines has also grown immensely.¹²

A preference towards e-commerce was seen in several countries, in particular for food supply, including the use of digital technologies by farmers to sell their goods directly to buyers or restaurants that converted to providing food or grocery delivery services. Amazon reported a near 200 per cent rise in profits throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, with profits rising over US\$6 billion.¹³

Following are some significant areas that the global scientific community could focus on assessing the positive effects of COVID-19:

- Family interactions due to lockdowns
- Perceptions of hygiene and immunity
- Prevention of other infections due to hand washing and using masks
- Pharmacovigilance - Reporting and monitoring adverse drug reactions
- Learned lessons and rationale that protection, in fact, is not in just spending on weapons/Star war program but investing in health and education
- Protection of one country as related to another
- Recognition of medical professionals, doctors, nurses, paramedics etc. - the frontline worker during pandemics as national and international heroes
- Reality of life-Enhancement in the Spiritual dimension of well-being.

Moreover, it is imperative to note that some countries, including Pakistan, have tackled COVID-19 very effectively through the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA).¹⁴ Thus, there is a need to utilise the services of the recently developed National Command and Operation Centre (NCOC)¹⁵ for monitoring COVID-19 spread & vaccination centres with electronic data collection for further projects. This will help to develop a disease registry, community-based prevalence studies on all diseases, particularly mental disorders, so that appropriate strategies can be devised. It will also help our country to effectively tackle disasters in the future, as Pakistan is prone to man-made and natural hazards such as drought, floods, heat waves, extreme cold, and earthquakes due to climate change and geopolitical situations.¹⁴

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