



Beyond the COVID-19 Pandemic: Keeping a Positive Culture

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Abstract

The World Health Organization has officially called an end to COVID-19 as a public health emergency of international concern. For over 3 years, the presence of this infection has been a significant detriment to Global Health Systems. However, it encouraged the innovation, promotion and realization of some preventive and positive health measures. These include the promotion of effective hand hygiene, the wearing of facemasks, observing physical distance, positive socio-cultural and environmental attitudes, and general improvement in health habits. These positive habits, if sustained and promoted beyond the COVID-19 pandemic, would be effective in preventing other diseases as an effort to attain Good Health and Well-being.

Keywords: COVID-19; disease prevention; Good Health and Well-being; health promotion; infectious diseases; mental health; sustainability.

Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently declared that Coronavirus Disease 19 (COVID-19) **is no longer a public health emergency of international concern**. For more than three years, this infection has claimed around 7 million lives per official reports, though believed the actual mortality is three times more [1, 2]. Regarded as one of the deadliest pandemics in history, this highly contagious infection was declared a pandemic within 3 months of its outbreak. Undoubtedly, while COVID-19 massively impacted the Global Healthcare System accounting for proliferating cases of direct and indirect mortality, morbidity, economic burden, compromised supply of drugs and delivery of health services, it also revolutionized healthcare. Authorities at all levels and individuals were challenged to provide innovative measures to address various public health concerns during this period which yielded positive outcomes. Also, this period afforded the world to appreciate positive socio-cultural and environmental habits which can manifest in improving the state of health of the global community. Though officially not a global health emergency, COVID-19 lingers and the WHO has cautioned comprising these measures.

In addition to COVID-19, these practices offer preventive barriers against many diseases and are highly encouraged to be continued. It is of great importance to recruit all possible interventions in attaining the Sustainable Development Goal of Good Health and Well-being, therefore, sustaining these cultures would be very beneficial.

Hand Hygiene

Hand hygiene remains an important and effective way of reducing the spread of infectious agents. The hands are the most exposed part of our bodies to the environment and contact various edifices, hence the risk of introducing external particles with unhygienic hands is high. Unclean hands act as a route for the transmission of pathogens which result in various gastrointestinal and respiratory infections, especially in children, the elderly and the immunocompromised. While this infection prevention method is simple and inexpensive, it offers the profound benefit of saving lives. In one meta-analysis, hand hygiene intervention resulted in 31% and 21% reductions in gastrointestinal and respiratory infections respectively [3]. The exact frequency of hand hygiene practices is not defined; however, multiple studies conclude that doing it frequently reduces the risk of infectious diseases [4].

While hygienic hand care practices have always been promoted as an effective infection control strategy, the COVID-19

pandemic saw a close to a full realization of this. With the intervention of the health authorities, many adhered to hand hygiene practices as a way of preventing the spread. This education and awareness promoted the frequent use of handwashing with soap and running water for at least 20 seconds as the preferred hand hygiene method, and in its absence, the use of at least 60% alcohol-based hand sanitizer [5]. Though, effective hand hygiene has been a protective factor, adherence among people as reported in one study surged only when cases of mortality and morbidity rose [6]. This calls for appropriate public health interventions to continually encourage hand hygiene among people, especially as COVID-19 is becoming less popular in the minds of people.

Education and awareness creation is pivotal in sustaining the habit of hand hygiene. The presence of COVID-19 should be resounded through all available media. In addition, the public should be informed about the benefit of effective hand hygiene in preventing other gastrointestinal, respiratory and skin infections. Investment of Government, healthcare authorities and other stakeholders in effective and continual education would prevent a lot of these diseases. Also, hand hygiene during the intense phases of the pandemic should still be promoted. Provision of alcohol-based hand sanitisers, handwashing areas, posters and public reminders in hospitals, supermarkets, schools and public transport should be continued. The deliberate effort to wash hands after touching common surfaces should still be encouraged as it were, during the pandemic.

Use of Facemask

Another important measure implemented in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic was the use of recommended facemasks in public places. The appropriate wearing of face masks offers a cheap and simple dual role in the primary prevention of droplet infections; by protecting the public from the carrier of the organisms (source control), and the non-infected from contracting the organisms. Regardless of the debates on the type of facemasks, multiple studies agreed that high compliance with the appropriate wearing of facemasks was effective in reducing the spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-COV-2) (7). The drive for the use of facemasks was generally low at the start of the pandemic but the enforcement of strict regulatory policies highly heightened their use. Also, increased awareness and individual perception of the risk and confidence in the Government motivated the use of protective facemasks among people [8].

The merits of using facemasks in this post-pandemic era still hold, even though Government policies on mandatory wearing of facemasks in public places are currently non-binding in most places. Common respiratory infections like influenza, common cold among others present a significant disease burden to people and the use of these masks, especially during seasons when they

abound is pivotal in reducing the harm. Pieces of evidence gathered from multiple randomized controlled trials, across varying times and settings concluded on the positive outcome of facemask interventions against respiratory infections in general [9]. To this end, the use of facemasks in crowded places should be encouraged especially among the elderly and immunocompromised. Progressive education, reminders and availability, when necessary, will be effective ways to realize their benefits in preventing other respiratory infections.

Physical Distancing

Physical distancing was another measure employed to reduce the spread of SARS-COV-2 from person to person during the pandemic. This recommended minimum distance of 1m in public places as a strategy to reduce the spread of the virus was backed by Government policies in some areas. A UK-based study reported a 74% reduction in contact with people daily when physical distancing was observed [10]. This remarkable decrease would lead to an eventual reduction in the rate of disease spread. While these were concerns during the pandemic, proximity especially in crowded areas remains a means for the spread of other organisms. Other public health concerns with this include the quality of air inhaled and skin-to-skin contact. Close contact enhances the spread of droplet infections like common cold, influenza and whooping cough, all of which have serious implications on healthcare systems. This justifies the relevance of continuing practicing social distancing methods where applicable. Avoiding crowded public transport, leaving adequate space in queues and avoiding unnecessarily crowded places, especially for the elderly, is important. If possible, remote working and communication avenues should be offered for workers and customers to ease the burden of crowding offices.

Socio-Cultural Factors

Generally, the pandemic had a significant bearing on social interactions with both close and weak ties at home, workplace and in the entire community. During the intense phase of the pandemic, most social bonds were reduced to the core and close networks (partners, close family and housemates) with significant weak ties and acquaintances breaking off. While virtual avenues of reconnecting and supporting social lives were available, they could not restore the impact of regular social interactions prior to the pandemic hence most people with weak ties, like students were at higher risk of being lonely [11, 12]. This situation resulted in reports of depressive symptoms, anxiety, forced isolation and unhealthy mental health status, the experience being higher in people with prior interactive social life, having higher concerns and constant fear of being infected [13,14]. Also, there were multiple global reports of increased domestic violence during this period as abusers and victims were in confinement and had persistent contact [15].

However, this unfortunate incidence of the pandemic also

presented an avenue for close family bonding, strengthening relationships and family reorganization to some people. People appreciated virtues like tolerance, compassion, empathy and mending broken relationships while acknowledging important things of life which we undermine on regular days. While relationships are generally necessary, their quality is most relevant and was correlated with positive mental health status during the lockdown phase of the pandemic [16]. In addition, people became more innovative, afforded the time for deliberate self-improvement, finding new interests, skills and hobbies; important social aspects of life that may otherwise have been difficult to attain [17]. Overall, crime rates reduced globally during the pandemic. In one report, an average of 37% reduction from cities across multiple continents was observed. This was however not homogeneous as it varied between the types of crime, the cities and the strictness of the restrictions [18]. The perspective of individuals and society in learning resilience, management and adaptations during the crisis, necessary coping strategies cannot be ignored and must be encouraged to maintain the positivity of society [19]. Institutions appreciated the role of options for social support like telepsychology and the spread of positivity via the media, all of which should be maintained in daily living for the good of everyone. These reports point to the feasibility of active, functional and healthy socio-cultural practices and must be encouraged to stay considering the quality they add to individuals and society.

Environmental Concerns

As the world strives towards sustainability and preserving the environment for future generations by minimizing the harmful impact of humans, the COVID-19 pandemic presented valuable lessons on positive cultures to adopt. The restrictions on economic, transportation and other activities had positive impacts on the environment. An increase in the quality of air and a remarkable reduction of nitrogen dioxide, an air pollutant associated with respiratory and cardiovascular disorders on long-term exposure, was observed across continents per reports from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and European Space Agency (ESA) [20]. Other reports presented with much consistency, the significant positive environmental impact of the pandemic like the reduction in air, water and noise pollution, decreased greenhouse gas emissions and ecological restoration across the world [21]. These air pollutants have been linked with negative respiratory health and over-expression of the angiotensin-converting enzyme 2 (ACE-2) receptors which enhanced the infection; hence their reduction had a direct link with mortality from COVID-19 [22]. In addition, numbers resulting from road traffic accidents and their mortalities were reduced generally across the world due to reduced traffic and overcrowding during this period [23].

Regardless of the positive impact of these restrictions on the environment, it was only transient hence deliberate measures

should be put in place to maintain these benefits. From a more sustainable perspective, the pandemic presented the chance to realize the culture of adopting greener practices to reduce pollution and control greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, it reveals the relevance of our natural environment in our health in general and the need for society to maintain a positive balance [24]. To this end, environmental rejuvenation could be seen as a public health intervention owing to its effect on human health. By rescuing the negative effects of pollution and restoring habitats to reduce the chances of zoonotic spillovers, opportunities for the ecosystem to be restored will have a massive impact on disease prevention, especially that of infections [25]. This calls for active policies from relevant authorities at local, national and international levels for appropriate integration for sustainable environmental realization. Likewise, individuals and organizations are encouraged to undertake educational and awareness creation programs to help restore the environment and maximize the benefits observed during the pandemic.

General Health Awareness

The last of the practices that should be encouraged beyond the pandemic is being conscious and prioritizing health. The scare of the COVID-19 pandemic made people put up with different lifestyle habits, with conflicting reports from different studies. While there were aspects of negativity in eating and drinking habits, it is undeniable that many commendable habits were realized as well. A significant number of people engaged in habits to keep them healthy and maintain intact immune systems. As reviewed by Bennett et al, multiple studies reported increased consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables, decreased fast food intake and increased home made foods. A decrease in alcohol consumption was observed in different places including Spain and Italy during the lockdown and beyond [26]. These practices, though motivated by circumstances during the pandemic will impact the health of people if encouraged beyond it. Consistent positive changes in food consumption habits have protective effects on the long-term development of so-called lifestyle diseases and improve immune health. Other positive reports included reduced cigarette smoking, a minor increased physical activity and increased adherence to the Mediterranean diet [27]. These point to the feasibility of making deliberate efforts towards healthy lives and prioritizing health with the right motivation. These in the long term will safeguard against risk factors of diseases like obesity and compromised immune health. Healthy living is an everyday priority and must be promoted in this post-covid era through education, constant reminders and favourable policies.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has left a significant mark on the history of humanity. The intense period of health emergency saw remarkable health, social and economic detriment across the

world. The able interventions of International Authorities and core players have yielded appreciable control of the situation and quite recently, the status of a global health emergency was called off by the WHO. While the effect was enormous, the innovative mitigation measures, ideas and positive cultures cultivated and the realization of beneficial aspects of life in this challenging time of history cannot be overlooked. In this manuscript, the aspects of hand hygiene, facemask usage, physical distancing, socio-cultural, environmental and elements of general health awareness were discussed as worth maintaining with deliberate efforts beyond this era of the pandemic. COVID-19 and other diseases remain a public health threat, hence these preventive interventions are of great relevance. An important aspect of realizing Good Health and Well-being by 2030 includes disease prevention, therefore collaborative efforts of authorities, stakeholders and individuals are needed to sustain these proven practices.

Author Contributions

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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Ethical Statement

There is no need for an ethical statement.

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