

Healthcare and Medical Education in Post COVID-19 Pandemic Era

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It is going to be a different world all together in the Post COVID-19 Pandemic era as it will affect every segment of the society as well as business, economy, education, healthcare, medical education will be no exception. World Health Organization (WHO) has made it clear that this COVID-19 virus is not going to go away soon and will be with us for a long time. Hence the world has to learn to live with it. The virus which started from Wuhan city of China in December, 2019 has spread all over the world. WHO releases the daily situation report giving details of the total number of confirmed cases, number of total deaths, number of newly diagnosed cases as well as those who have been cured? As per its latest Report No.121 Issued on May 20th 2020 total number of confirmed cases are- 4,789,205- and total number of deaths are 3,18,789.¹ According to National Disaster Management Agency, Pakistan the total confirmed infected cases as on May 20th 2020 are 42,125 and the number of deaths stand at 903.²

The WHO recommend basic protective measures for COVID-19 are:³

1. Washing of hands frequently with soap and water for minimum of twenty seconds.
2. Maintain social distancing ensuring at least three feet distance to avoid droplet/micro

particle infection due to coughing, sneezing and even talking.

3. Avoid touching face (eyes, nose and mouth). Studies have shown that rate of unknowingly touching the face is up to 15-23 times per hour. The most probable mode of getting infection is from many inanimate surfaces.
4. Those who are sick with fever, cough or have difficulty in breathing should seek medical advice early and stay informed to follow updated advice by their healthcare provider and official resources.

This virus has challenged the political leadership of the world. It has affected the poor and rich countries alike. Even the richest country of the world like United States has been worst hit with deaths about one lacs so far and it has exposed the deficiencies of their health services. The situation is no better in other developed countries like UK and other European countries like Italy and Spain. In such a situation every country has been forced to have a fresh look at its health services and education including medical education. Prolonged Lockdowns could also have an impact on student's mental wellbeing and learning behaviour.

Children who get affected during such crisis because of their vulnerability will require special attention. A recent study has summarized the interventions and resources available to promote child mental health and wellbeing during such challenging times. The authors have also suggested giving priority to mental health including Child and

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Adolescent mental health because the immediate and long-term psychological effects of COVID-19 pandemic are going to be disasters. Interventions needs to focus on nurturing resilience in children and adolescents by better communication to address their fears and concerns and encourage their routine activities.⁴ COVID-19 pandemic is also likely to have a much greater impact on persons with pre-existing mental health conditions. It will increase their stress levels and have negative psychiatric effects.⁵

During the lockdowns, we have seen more emphasis on Telemedicine and the use of information technology for extending healthcare. However, one must not forget that Telemedicine can be a useful modality effective in investigations including radiology. It can be effectively used in dermatology to some extent but it cannot and will never replace the physicians. The importance of Clinical Skills and Good examination remains extremely important even today. Hence any new healthcare set up has to take all these issues into account. Even otherwise in Middle Income Limited Resource countries, it is not so cost effective because technology brings with it more problems as well. An efficient information technology system with proper back up support services are essential to maintain and sustain such services.

Online Medical Education is being attempted to overcome the situation created by this deadly virus which necessitates social distancing. Some studies have also supported the use of on line learning in medical and dental institutions as it has numerous advantages. However, they have also suggested that the faculty should be trained in using online modalities besides encouraging the students – centered learning. But one has to keep in mind its limitations as well like limited attention span of the students and resource intensive nature of online learning. Teachers have also reported misbehavior by the students during such online learning classes. The study by Khadijah Mukhtar et al.⁶ has discussed all these issues in detail. It also needs adequate initial investment, training of the faculty to use different modes of online medical education. Higher Education Commission in Pakistan has also suggested education institutions to start using online education courses. Some medical institutions have also started using online education courses and they are trying to overcome

the teething troubles.

Similarly, as regards assessment, one has to ensure that methods of assessment are not only safe, reliable, valid, fair, but also acceptable and feasible. Different formats of assessment and their application in formative and summative assessment during and after the COVID-19 pandemics have been described in detail by Rehan et al.⁷ in a recent publication.

We also need to take extra care of the healthcare professionals on duty during COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them are anxious, most often overworked. They need to be supported financially as well not just by clapping. Their fears should be explored and coping strategies needs to be researched.⁸

On the other hand, COVID-19 Pandemic has also provided the healthcare facilities with an opportunity to plan Inter hospital communication and transfer practices during emergencies. It has been practiced by Indus Health Network during this crisis. This development of referral mechanism is extremely important and we should develop it in all the major cities which will go a long way in improvements in patient outcome through proper referrals.⁹

Other advantages include that so far, we were dependent on import of PPEs, N95 Masks, Surgical Masks, Diagnostic Kits and Ventilators. However, the recent exhibition arranged by Ministry of Science and Technology at Islamabad has shown that now we can produce most of these things locally not only to meet the local needs but even for exports. Various locally fabricated designs of Ventilators are also being tested which are said to be extremely cost effective. It has also intensified research activity and now numerous clinical studies are under way at different institutions within the country. University of Health Sciences at Lahore and National Institute of Blood Diseases at Karachi have initiated some clinical trials on Chloroquine and COVID-19 plasma which are reported to have given good results in the few patients who were transfused this plasma from the cured COVID-19 patients. Healthcare professionals have come up with local guidelines, suggestions to improve the healthcare of these patients. This has been published in various local biomedical journals who have produced special issues devoted to COVID-19 and some more such issues are planned

by various journals. All these augers well. We need to keep up this momentum and utilize this opportunity to come up with innovative ideas to improve health care and medical education using cost effective technology and intervention measures.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None to declare.

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

None to disclose.

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