

EDITORIAL

COVID-19: The Next Steps for the World

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Since December 2019, COVID-19 is impacting the health, economy, education, and well-being of every country in the world. The total number of reported COVID-19 cases will soon surpass 100 million and the death toll will be more than 20 million. At this moment, the top 10 countries with the most reported number of cases currently are the USA, India, Brazil, Russia, UK, France, Turkey, Italy, Spain, and Germany. These countries altogether represent 31.7% of the world's population. However, they reported 65.5% of the total COVID-19 cases and 58.9% of total deaths. For containing the spread of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, Malaysia was one of the most successful countries in the world. However, since September 2020, the situation in Malaysia started changing, and at this moment Malaysia is reporting more than 2,500 new cases per day. During the past year, all the countries in the world acted fast and took different initiatives to reduce transmission of SARS-CoV-2, find effective drugs that can improve the clinical outcomes of COVID-19, and invent vaccines that can give immune protection. The first vaccine that was approved was invented by Pfizer/BioNTech and in December 2020, within one year of the beginning of the pandemic, the UK was the first country to start mass vaccination. As reported by the World Health Organization (WHO) in January 2021, more than 50 COVID-19 vaccines were in different phases of clinical trial and five vaccines received certain national regulatory approval for mass vaccination. However,

given all these developments the COVID-19 pandemic is still making a devastating impact on the whole world and the pandemic is not going to over soon. Therefore, we need to discuss what we can do now to deal with the pandemic and ensure the health and well-being of the citizens of the world.

Steps Recommended by WHO

In April 2020, WHO released six steps that can be used by any country to keep the SARS-CoV-2 transmission at manageable levels. Depending on the level of transmission, many countries in the world have imposed different types of restrictions. These steps can guide the countries to take necessary actions to life restrictions and resume economic and social life. Therefore, these steps are relevant to the world. The six steps recommended by WHO are:

1. Transmission of the coronavirus or SARS-CoV-2 is under control.
2. The health system can detect, test, isolate, and treat every case and trace every contact.
3. The risk of outbreak hotspots is minimized in vulnerable settings like health facilities.
4. Workplaces, schools, and other essential places have preventative measures in place.
5. Measures are in place to manage the risk of importing new cases.
6. Communities are fully educated, engaged, and empowered to live under a new normal.

Undoubtedly, it is a tall task for any country in the world to fulfil all these conditions but the countries can do their best to attain them. The first step is about minimizing the transmission of the virus. The world now knows the routes of transmission and effective ways to reduce transmission. The universal use of quality face mask, appropriate hand hygiene, and social distancing are still the measures that have the most impact on the reduction of transmission.

Though no health system in any country in the world will be able to detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact, the world has witnessed successful efforts in countries like New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, Bhutan, Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, etc. As COVID-19 can cause very mild and undetectable infections in a large proportion of cases it is virtually impossible to detect and test every case. A more realistic option is the detection of all symptomatic cases, their contacts and isolate them. This strategy will slow the transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and can lead to a condition known as suppression (when a COVID-19 patient spreads the disease to less than one person on average). This approach will also flatten the epidemic curve meaning that the new cases will occur over a long period and the health sector will be able to cope with the demand for healthcare.

The third step highlights that outbreak risk should be minimized in special settings like health facilities and nursing homes. This can be done by careful handling of patients, care providers, users, visitors, and suppliers and by ensuring appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). WHO has guidelines for the rational use of personal protective equipment for COVID-19 and these guidelines should be strictly followed.

The fourth step is about the preventive measures in schools, workplaces, and other essential places. In all countries in the world, COVID-19 preventive measures are in place on a different scale. For example, crowded workplaces are working in shifts and many employees are working from home. In the case of schools, though the risk of death of the small children is very low, all the children, teachers, and parents of the small children should take necessary precautions. All of them should wear face masks, there should be facilities for hand-washing and the schools should be cleaned and disinfected every day. Any symptomatic children should be isolated and home quarantined. If the children live

with their grandparents, the grandparents should be relocated to safer places before the children start going to schools. All workplaces should also take similar preventive measures. Every hour, there can be a hand-washing break for 10 minutes and the workplace should also have proper facilities for hand-washing soaps, hand sanitisers, face masks, bins with lids, and a proper disposal system for these items. There should be a temperature check every day during the entry of the workers using hand-held devices. Evidence suggests that the mortality risk is higher among people 60 years or older. However, given the poor metabolic health of the people in many developing countries, it will not be advisable for a person above 50 years old to go to the workplace until the risk of infection is over. Employees in this age group can continue to work from home.

The fifth WHO criterion is about managing the risk of importing new cases. The world is still having travel restrictions in various forms. The countries need to continue the travel restrictions depending on the situation in the country. All arriving people should have a COVID-19 negative pass and should be quarantined for 14 days. The entry restriction guidelines should be periodically reviewed and revised. Non-essential domestic and international travels should be avoided and the national guidelines for PPE use during travel should be followed.

The sixth and last condition is about the community. The WHO recommends that communities are fully educated, engaged, and empowered to live under a new normal. The hand-washing practices, availability of soaps and hand sanitisers at home and workplaces, travel bans, touch-free doors and elevators are going to stay as part of the new normal. In many countries, the media is playing a key role to make sure that people in the country practise the COVID-19 prevention recommendations, e.g. hand-washing practices, use of sanitisers/soaps, wear face masks, etc. Studies from many countries reported that communities still have

misconceptions about COVID-19 prevention practices and the proportion of people with such misconceptions is higher among women than men. Moreover, a significant proportion of people do not practise the recommended behaviours though they know about them. Therefore, along with the media, the government health workforce, and other non-government organizations, school children, law-enforcing agencies, etc. can take proactive measures to educate, engage and empower people so that everyone is aware of the prevention practices and practise them all the time.

Vaccines: The New Hope

As mentioned earlier, the mass vaccination for the prevention of COVID-19 began in December 2020. By 14 January 2021, 32.4 million doses of different types of vaccines were administered in 45 countries of the world. Among these doses, 10.8 million, 9 million, and 3.1 million doses were administered in the USA, China, and the UK, respectively. The efficacy of these vaccines range between 50% to 95% and millions of doses of different vaccines are now being manufactured for mass vaccination. Though we do not know much about the duration of immune protection from these vaccines, the vaccines should be treated as lights of hope to end the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there should be an equitable distribution of vaccines in all the countries of the world. So far, vaccine administration has been limited mainly to high- and middle-income countries and therefore, urgent action should be taken to make vaccines available to all countries in the world.

COVID-19 and Research: Endpoints

COVID-19 also gives us an opportunity for a large number of social, behavioural, economic and biological researches. All the countries in the world should form research cells for COVID-19 so that the research cells can guide different types of studies. As COVID-19 is likely to be responsible for subsequent

waves, discovery research (understanding the burden, impact of COVID-19 and the SARS-CoV-2 itself), development research (e.g. development and testing of new treatment combinations, prevention technologies, tests for detection of SARS-CoV-2, and vaccine research) and delivery research (operations and implementation research to improve the delivery of the interventions) should continue. The research cells should also collect, collate, and review evidence from different parts of the world and make country-specific recommendations. Accordingly, there should be an environment that all the policy decisions are guided by science and data. The world will have to continue the fight against this virus in all possible ways until humankind wins the fight.

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