

**Title- Dilemma in the foreign lands during COVID-19: An outlook of an expat healthcare professional with a take on a social perspective**

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**Abstract**

The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infection as a global pandemic owing to the fast transmission of this disease worldwide. To prevent and slow the transmission of this contagious illness, the public health officials of many affected countries scrambled to introduce measures aimed at controlling its spread. Initially, this mainly involved notifying the health-care providers and providing them with diagnostic protocols. But it very soon it noted that the extent to which the disease had spread was much greater than initially thought. As a result, unprecedented interventions/measures, including strict contact tracing, quarantine of entire towns/cities, closing of borders and travel restrictions, have been implemented by most of the affected countries. The aim of this paper is to disperse the thoughts and takes of this situation for being health care professionals who are experiencing it firsthand in a foreign land. In addition, the role of the Saudi governance to combat the current situation is also discussed.

**Keywords-** Coronavirus; COVID-19; Dental education; Health care; Pandemic.

**Introduction**

On January 30, 2020, WHO has declared the COVID-19 infection as a global pandemic.<sup>1</sup> With the COVID-19 infection all set to become a household example in the modern times for akin to

plague, there is no better timing to disperse the thoughts and takes of this situation for being health care professionals who are experiencing it firsthand. As a dental professionals and also as a citizens under lockdown, both these have definitely shaped our thoughts on dual horizons. Needless to say, that the hope that modern medical sciences can conquer almost anything gets clouded over by the emotions that we face as a citizen. What is more frustrating is difficult to fathom, whether the desperation to overcome this plague or handling the sanctions on our freedom. Further twisting this disarray is the fact that educational sector has been affected in unprecedented way. Undoubtedly the pandemics impose devastating consequences on communities and exhibits long-term rippling effects in the economy and the health care system as well.<sup>2</sup> Never in the history of mankind, have we faced a global public health issue of this massive magnitude with its effect across a spectrum of economic activity, travel, governance, education, and the like.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, as our hope to binge in social intermingling does not seem to fade, we all have to work towards one common goal, to contain the virus and restoring the normalcy for the sake of a vivacious neighborhood. The aim of this paper is to discuss an understanding of the current situation as the health care professionals in a foreign land. In addition, the role of the Saudi governance to combat this vicious infection is also discussed.

### **COVID-19 in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)**

One of the most challenging tasks in a global pandemic risk is to contain the spread as much and as soon as possible. Remaining undaunted by the economic challenges most of the major economies have dived into the uncharted seas of the lockdowns, curfews and limitations of the movement of the population. KSA is the largest country in the Middle East, occupying approximately four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula in km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>4</sup> It has >32 million population of which approximately 63% are native Saudis, with the remaining consisting of working-age immigrants, originating mainly from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines.<sup>5</sup>

KSA, holiest of places for one of the major religions, Islam, has also been battered by the presence of the COVID-19 with about 83,384 positive cases<sup>6</sup> as on May 31, 2020. Ensuing changes in the society at various levels and its effect is well felt by each strata of the society who are undergoing these times of tests. Life has come to a standstill in once a vibrant society and people are feeling the brunt of this deadly virus.

Not only COVID-19 infection but this country is still battling with another viral infection known as Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus (MERS-CoV). Although after several years of MERS-CoV circulation in KSA, intensive efforts by the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) have led to drastic improvement in infection control practices in health-care facilities kingdom wide and most health-care workforce having a very high index of suspicion for any suspected MERS-CoV cases but still the standardized and approved point of care testing for MERS-CoV is lacking, and hence the health care professionals continue to be challenged with rapidly detecting and properly isolating patients with MERS-CoV.<sup>7</sup> This challenge will now be faced by the whole global health community dealing with COVID-19. Hence the symptomatic patients should now be tested for both MERS-CoV and COVID-19 simultaneously. With the ongoing MERS-CoV circulation in animal reservoir (dromedary camels) in the Arabian Peninsula and the continuing zoonotic spillover with 70% of cases resulting from nosocomial transmission,<sup>8</sup> the risk of emergence of COVID-19 within the same community would be overwhelming to the health care infrastructure of the countries affected by MERS-CoV. This is a true concern with the already

rapid international spread to 25 countries outside China, especially with the ability of COVID-19 to spread from a totally asymptomatic person.<sup>7</sup>

### **An expatriate's view on Saudi government in combating COVID-19**

Being an expatriate has been challenging at various fronts, but with several years of being in such a welcoming society has been not less than a comfort cushion. This welcoming atmosphere has even widened more in the current situation of global crisis. It is not only commendable the way the Saudi governance has managed to restrain the spread of the virus but also worth appreciating is the way the daily life needs have been available to everyone without any much perturbation.

Early lockdown with phased interventions at various levels and restricting the population movement depending upon density is a lustrous example of a bureaucracy which is socially responsible. Creating awareness amongst the community through recurring messages on mobile phones and innovative ideas to catch the attention of denizens has been quite effective tool initiated by Saudi MOH. Involvement is to such an extent that the ministers themselves have been circulating videos on hand washing techniques and their actions has been on the war front. Additionally, a continuous awareness to follow trustworthy sources and reliable guidance on social media and avoid myths and rumors is also being promoted.

The geographic location with deserts as definite borders around settlements seems to have smothered the disease to a great extent. Social distancing has been one of the cruxes in limiting the spread of the disease, with at least 3 feet of distance between individuals. Secondly, isolation through home quarantines and lockdowns and the cessation of almost all working activities have been proven to be immensely important in the curbing the viral dispersion. And it is a pleasure to see around that the authorities in kingdom have left no stone unturned to achieve these goals. Numerous health care professionals and students have volunteered to fight the pandemic by setting up awareness camps and helping the screening procedure for people who visit the supermarkets and likewise.

Medical care of the affected people and quarantine facilities is as important as any other step as recovery has been majorly attributed to the way the patient is handled. Kingdom has issued an order for free medical care and quarantine and facilities which are world class. Rich with resources to handle the situation and plethora of personal protective equipment has complimented the care brilliantly. Nonetheless, the lessons learned by MERS-CoV circulations are well utilized by the Saudi government to keep the emerging pandemic and its severe outbreak under control by promoting drastic impact measures to 'flatten the curve' of the COVID-19 infection.

### **COVID-19 and the dental education**

Perhaps the one of the most affected dimensions of the society is inarguably the educational sector. Thousands of schools and colleges have faced the backlash of closure and students all over have suffered in an unforgiving manner. Dentistry as a whole is not only a challenging field, but also demanding at various levels which is well supported by the fact that it needs one of the most grueling practical works including a balance between medical knowledge and dental services. Needless to say, any branch or field which needs this much of physical presence of the wards within the campus has been severely crippled.

It is a well-known fact that open communication among students, clinical teachers, and administrative staff enhances mutual trust and facilitates adequate cooperation.<sup>1</sup> But during the

outbreak period, all kinds of unnecessary aggregation of people should be avoided without hampering the learning process and this is exactly what the Saudi government did by initializing the distant learning through the smartboards to continue the learning process by the students. Online lectures, case studies, and problem-based learning tutorials are delivered by all the teaching faculties within the KSA. Existing smart devices and applications have already made it possible for students to listen to and review lectures whenever and wherever possible. These smart learning methods are made effective from the very early hours of COVID-19 outbreak within the Kingdom. Additionally, the students are continuously encouraged to engage themselves in self learning, make full use of online resources, and learn about the latest academic developments. Other than this, continuous academic advising services are provided to those students who need any academic or psychological assistance.

Even though distant learning has proved to be vital in stabilizing or at least is trying to balance the learning experience but still it needs to be proven in the long terms which can be gauged only when we assess the outcomes through student experiences. There has been no dearth on delivering lectures and imparting knowledge through presentations via the electronic media, but laboratory sessions and patient experience has literally handicapped the overall course experience. The pandemic has deeply affected the delivery of services by the various health care specialties especially the dental professionals since they are at high risk for nosocomial infection and can become potential carriers of the disease. These risks can be attributed to the unique nature of dental interventions, which include aerosol generation, handling of sharps, and proximity of the provider to the patient's oropharyngeal region.<sup>9</sup> Although the significant limitation of clinical activities in the dental colleges is affecting the learning experience of the students but as a health care providers, it is of utmost importance to protect our patients, staff, family members, and society, and we must focus on preventing future outbreaks.

One of the perspectives of education which has definitely faced the repercussions of the lockdown has been examinations. It is one of the challenges which we need to explore as how to assess our students in this time of social distancing and curfews. There is still a long way to go for understanding this tool of education and its applications and outcomes in an unprecedented way.

## **Conclusion**

Every bird at the end of the day wants to return to its nest, wherein it finds the solace, unless a migrant one finds himself in a promised land. It is no wonder that almost third of population of Kingdom is an expat population who have over the years made this beautiful country as their home. And as we face lockdown and the COVID-19 illness has been giving a cold shoulder worldwide, there might be few places on earth which can be counted on your fingers, to be and to feel safe as the Kingdom. It is absolutely challenging to balance all the essential frontiers like social, physical and mental wellbeing of the residents, educational, health care and daily needs along with deterring the pandemic. Also, there has been no bigotry and discrimination in any form, in the delivery of various services by the Saudi government during this outbreak. Experiencing it first hand, it is needless to say truly it is *land o' the Leal* and a wholesome place to be to face such a profane crisis.

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