

## Perspective

### Public non-compliance to scientific medical advice : A stumbling block in health service delivery

Rudrajit Paul, Jyotirmoy Pal

The recent Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the relation between the medical profession and the common public in a glaring manner. And one significant observation has been the stiff public resistance to evidence-based public health measures in countries like the USA and India. In the USA, there has been vocal resistance to mask-wearing and protests against the ban on public gathering. In places like Ohio and Michigan, there were high levels of public anger against the order requiring mandatory mask wearing in public. In these places, government officials even had to rescind orders regarding mask wearing. This public response occurred even after a coterie of trusted scientists repeatedly issued advisory explaining the benefit of face covering. In India, at the height of the first wave of the pandemic, in several places religious gatherings were organized. This occurred even after there were numerous messages in the media that going to crowded places was the strongest risk factor for getting Covid.

Ratner et al have nicely discussed this public reaction in an article in the *Lancet* on October 19, 2020. The authors of this article have expressed surprise at the fact that the public chose to deny medical evidence in spite of having such a wealth of information at their fingertips. Compared to all the previous pandemics, the society in 2020 has access to much more reliable and up-to-date health information. However, while much of the society followed those guidelines, there was a sizeable portion that chose to neglect them. This is not something new; science always had to struggle with the dark forces of superstition and incredulity. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence for climate change, a large section of policy makers around the world still deny its very existence.

The authors propose that mass psychoanalysis should be included in public health planning in future. Psychoanalysis is mainly concerned with dealing with the psyche of individual patients. But when mass hysteria and rumours take the centre-stage and thwart meaningful public health response, then the thoughts and reactions of the public can't be neglected. It is true that anxiety and fear can obliterate rational thought and looming disaster can paradoxically push people into a denial mode. This is where public health professionals can collaborate with psychoanalysts. The latter can suggest some ways to improve the public

health messages and remove anxiety from public psyche. Thus, the authors propose adding psychoanalysts in the team dealing with public health crises in the future.

Non-adherence to medical therapy is a common setback in the health sector at all times. A recent study in the USA found that even after repeated counselling, patients with conditions like diabetes, asthma or depression regularly default in the treatment. To be fair, there are a lot of reasons for this behaviour, starting from mistrust in the medical system to cost factor and regimen complexity. Regarding the current Covid pandemic, while preventive therapy like mask-wearing and hand washing are not costly, there are other issues in countries like India like access to clean water. Also, in a country like India with large number of daily labourers, the feasibility of complete lockdown as a sustainable measure is also doubtful. For many Indians, it is a choice between dying from the virus (which has a mortality of around 2%) and dying from hunger (which is a more palpable threat with higher mortality). Naturally for these people, for whom struggle with infections and malnutrition is a part of life, a complete cessation of economic activities for another infection is a bridge too far. This is the point where public health professionals have to factor in the economic and psychological factors. For USA and Europe, ban on religious functions is a feasible step. But many people in India consider religious rituals to be an essential part of their lives and they would like to, rather, increase the rituals during this pandemic to seek deliverance from this danger. How do we counter this attitude?

Thus, this current pandemic has shown that service delivery in public health is not just dependent on evidence based medicine. There are other factors like mass anxiety and denial which can be significant forces hindering effective health measures. Delivering proper information to the public is not enough; we also need to address the natural human instincts of anxiety, denial and fear. This is where there needs to be an urgent cross-talk between public health and psychology professionals.

Further reading :

Ratner A, Gandhi N — Psychoanalysis in combatting mass non-adherence to medical advice. *Lancet* 2020; [Online First, correspondence]