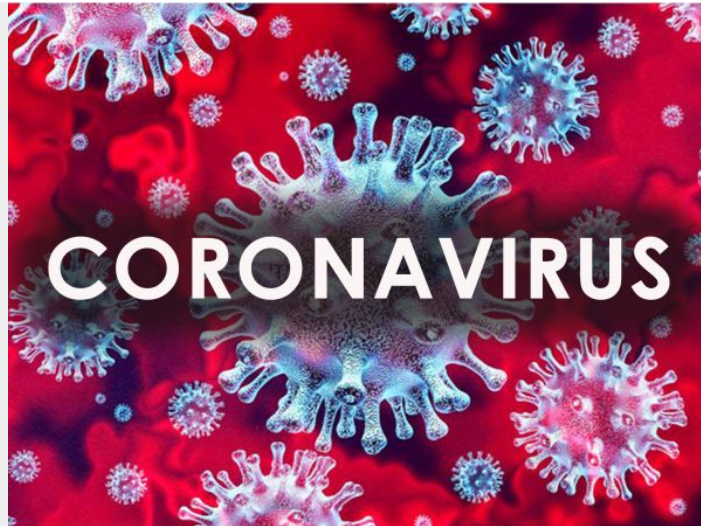


# WHAT SOUTH ASIAN NATIONS MUST UNDERSTAND ABOUT CORONAVIRUS

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## **Modern medicine in search of meaning:**

"Every patient provides us with two questions. The first is "What can you do for him, second is "What can you learn from him." These were words from Harvey Cushing years ago.

The story of coronavirus is more or less similar. The virus provides us with two questions, "what can we do about it, and what can we learn about it."

## **The virus and its kind:**

The outbreak of the virus is believed to have started the journey from a meat market in Wuhan in China and has now made its way through the international borders in different countries across the Asia and the Pacific. By all means, the virus is a global health concern which pushes the diplomatic watchdogs on high alert.

Diseases in the global village is transboundary in nature and following International Health Regulations laid out becomes extremely imminent. Coronavirus is not a new virus known to the global health community. The virus has lived before in other variants. The virus causes illnesses ranging from common cold to more severe variants like Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome ( SARS)

and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome ( MERS). The causative agent of the outbreak appears to be animals and this time, snakes seem to have caused the outbreak in the markets of Wuhan. Coronavirus can spread by coughing, kissing or saliva contact with persons infected with the virus.

In the recent meeting of the International Health Regulations 2005 Emergency Committee, Chinese Government authorities informed about the increase in the number of cases with new epidemiological information and deaths having occurred. While based on incoming inputs, the virus does not seem as dangerous as SARS or MERS, nevertheless the virus must be curtailed on war footing and not taken lightly. The mortality rate from Wuhan seems to have killed patients who are over 60 years old, essentially immunocompromised because of additional co-morbid conditions like diabetes and other associated illnesses in their advanced conditions.

It may be remembered that the virus currently has no cure, however, symptomatic treatment remains the norm with already existing medicines

## **Establishing national capacities and strengthening existing ones:**

In the wake of this virus, or any such humanitarian emergencies which arise from time to time, national governments must review gaps in their health systems, undertake rapid risk assessment and plan for appropriate response and controls.

Leaving behind egos, health ministries must sincerely engage with pro-active Non-Government Organizations as well, who are capable of providing the extra leg needed to walk the distance. Country governments must believe in their existing health infrastructure and not depend on private hospitals with vested interests to bail them out always.

With limited available material evidence and historical experience, it may be prudent for local health authorities to issue directives to citizens to avoid consuming raw and uncooked animal products and ensure hand washing isn't compromised at any juncture. Health workers and high-risk group in contact with affected animals and humans must adhere to universal precautions laid out.

National capacities can further be strengthened by enhancing risk communication strategies by health promotion at all layers of governance. Surge support systems at local levels within governments and along with partner non-government agencies must be increased and facilitated.

It would do good to follow the principles of infection prevention and control (IPC) during healthcare provided to suspected cases.

Communication can be given in the hands of few community health physicians and public health experts by also feeding them with daily developments at national and sub-national levels. Media representatives with previous history of work in health communications may be engaged to further the outreach required to reach the public. Local airports must have posters and banners alerting passengers about the need of care. In the light of coronavirus, it remains important to alert people about the required awareness.

There is reasonable element of anxiety among civilians today given the nature of irresponsible reporting by the free press. Strengthening community engagement strategies during such times of

international health crisis becomes imperative. An easy way to do so, is proactively informing community influencers, youth associations, religious leaders and unions to carry the message forward.

It is essential to also standardize communication with dateline as people are torn apart these days in understanding authentic timelines and messages arriving in instalments and often half baked.

Government controls at various levels as laid out by World Health Organization during such crisis recommends the establishment of prompt laboratory testing with sustainable infection prevention and control measures, preventing overcrowding at and near emergency departments and ensuring supplies for personal protective equipment for those handling patient care.

The dictum during any disaster management or outbreak management is to protect forces that work hard to save patients. Unfortunately, China has lost the battle at the initial stage, where an infected doctor died. What other nations must refrain from is to repeat what China has made. Lastly reporting of cases at laboratories must follow national guidelines in reporting, nevertheless suspected cases must be informed to public health authorities at the earliest.

Putting these measures in place and closely working with local government health authorities across countries will ensure a peaceful preventing of the virus and also curtailing the spread. Given the manner in which the disease has been moving, it appears that the next few months belong to South Asia and South East Asia.

Be on your vanguard !!