

The Role of Health Promotion during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Guest Article

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Introduction

In early August 2020, there were nearly 18 million confirmed cases of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19), including 686,145 deaths globally; very rapid growth in prevalence since the first case was reported to the World Health Organization in December 2019 (WHO, 2020). In a desperate attempt to contain the further spread of the virus, governments across the world have taken public health interventions that are unprecedented. To prevent the further spread of COVID-19 infection, many countries have taken strict measures such as the complete lockdown of a country restricting the movement of people in public, forcing people to stay at home except for emergencies and certain essential jobs. At the same time countries are also trying to scale up their testing capacity and expand their contact tracing system while scientists around the world are in a race to develop a vaccine against the virus as well as drugs to alleviate its symptoms.

Role of Health Promotion

During this time of COVID-19 pandemic crisis, health promotion becomes more important than ever to support the health and well-being of people in our communities. We agree with Van den Broucke (2020) that the real heroes in the fight against COVID-19 are: “virologists, epidemiologists, doctors and nurses, and even if many of the actions taken serve a preventative purpose, their focus is on the prevention of disease, not on promoting health.” Health promotion activities aimed at improving access to better information and services plays a vital role in giving people more control over their health and well-being. Health promotion can make an essential contribution to fighting a global pandemic such as COVID-19. In modern societies, new public health approaches are needed that are adapted to local situations and needs.

Since there is no vaccine available against COVID-19, the infection has been circulating rapidly within the population. Hence, the only measure that we can adapt at the moment is to prevent its further spread within the communities. Some of the preventive measures such as social distancing, frequent hand washing, wearing face masks and avoiding direct contact with sick people or suspected Covid-19 cases could reduce the risk of COVID-19 infection (Tamang et al., 2020). However, translating these measures into daily practice is a big challenge (Lee &

Chuh, 2010). Hence, appropriate and timely health prevention messages could act as a catalyst in preventing the spread of COVID-19 infection whilst health promotion will allow people to gain or regain over their health and well-being.

As a discipline within public health and a field of professional practice, health promotion can contribute to addressing the COVID-19 threat at different levels, some of which are discussed here.

Improving Preventing Behaviour

Since COVID-19 is a new disease, the only measures that can help to prevent the further spread of disease is the containment of the virus. At the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, health authorities issued warnings and recommendations through different platforms such as television, infographics in social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. This was often followed by imposing legal restrictions on the movement of people, which has resulted in some degree of success in containing the virus (Van den Broucke. 2020). However, changing people's behaviour as well as their perception takes time. A significant number of people didn't follow the restrictions because they believed that they are at low or no risks, or simply underestimated the seriousness of the problem. Hence, changing people's behaviour requires encouraging people to adopt preventive behaviours in their day to day practice by presenting them with a clear rationale.

We also need to remember that there are likely to be unintended consequences of preventative measures. For example, as Mahato and colleagues (2020) pointed out interventions such as social distancing, (self-)isolation and quarantine can itself result in increased isolation of vulnerable people who are in an abusive home, and hence decreased-levels of well-being.

Everybody has a key role to play in the prevention of COVID-19, but health promotion looks at the bigger picture to ensure people's well-being is not negatively affected by general COVID-19 preventative measures. So, the health promotion messages and information should be designed in a way that is understandable to the general public but the interventions should also be appropriate and acceptable to the relevant subgroups in the population.

Empowering the Organisation and Community

One of the important ways to empower community during public health emergencies, such as flooding, an earthquake or the COVID-19 pandemic, is to effectively engage in risk communication. Working with national authorities and organisations such as the WHO, the public can be educated about this disease using multiple communication techniques such as social media, mass media (radio, TV, billboards) and stakeholder and community engagement (WHO Africa 2020). Providing clear guidance on risk, prevention and awareness of symptoms to the communities in partnership with local organisations and community-based programming is the key (Alton Mackey 2020). Empowering communities means educating people and encouraging them to change their behaviour for their own benefit but also that of others, in order to minimise the spread of COVID-19, but also to provide the resources and opportunities to make such changes.

Health Education, Health literacy

Many organisations around the world have emphasised on health education and information sharing on COVID-19 in different ways. For example, the WHO, one of the key actors during this COVID-19 pandemic, is providing information to the public, health sector and governments on prevention and control practices. Similarly, in local context, United States Centers for Disease Control (US CDC) and Health Education England have been disseminating health education materials including educational videos, e-learning resources and webinars on their websites (Gray et al., 2020; NHS Health Education England 2020). Studies have proposed that personalised health education intervention to the public provides a greater degree of lifestyle change thus decreasing serious course of infection (ClinicalTrials.gov 2020). Similarly, video-based entertainment educational approach has been proposed to educate schoolchildren, with an engaging and informative story line, emphasising correct hand washing procedures and the social distancing measures (Gray et al., 2020).

Dealing with Mis/disinformation

As the virus keeps on spreading so does the risk of misinformation and false information which the WHO described as an 'infodemic'. When there is a lot of false or inaccurate information about the virus, its origin and effects as well as about the action of authorities to tackle the pandemic, it is difficult for many people to find reliable sources of information and guidance they might need to interpret the information provided. Whether the misinformation is profit or politically motivated, it is important to protect the general public from false information regarding COVID-19. The scientist can help in their own ways by calling out fake stories and engaging with the public. Besides by countering misinformation about COVID-19 by scientists, they can help policymakers avoid introducing harmful policies, improve public understanding of the pandemic and save lives (Fleming 2020). Since social media can become a gateway for the spread of misinformation some of the ways to fight misinformation are by sharing correct information, providing links to correct information, and sharing information only from credible sources such as WHO or US CDC (Campbell 2020).

Conclusion

As governments around the world struggle to use a range of prevention strategies, from imposing lockdowns to scaling up testing and contact tracing, one effective way to support the health and well-being of the general public is through health promotion. Community education and risk communication carried out by organisations at different levels and engagement of locals in order to understand the risk and seriousness of COVID-19 is what health promotion can offer. The main aim thus is to encourage behaviour change among the general people that will help them adapt helpful behaviours in this long fight against COVID-19.

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