

Beyond the Spectrum of Disease

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When the first of January dawned this year, the people rejoiced and wished each other a happy new year. Little did they know that 2020 will go down in history as the year of disasters. From the Amphan cyclone to the Uttarakhand forest fires and desert locusts in North India, humanity is reeling under the wrath of Nature.

However, the most devastating calamity of all is the raging COVID-19 pandemic that has claimed 1,637,155 lives worldwide and 1,44,451 in our country till date. It has proved to be a Master Teacher of Medicine, the involvement being pan-systemic. The damage done by the virus itself is surpassed by a hyperinflammatory state triggering multiorgan dysfunction. The most frequent organ dysfunction described comprises lungs, heart, kidneys, gastrointestinal tract, brain, peripheral nerves, and muscles. Newer studies are exploring the less highlighted domains like skin, eye, endocrine organs, and the psychological consequences of COVID-19.

A personal brush with the disease has heightened my perceptions about the social implications of this condition. The effects are variable on the different sections of society like children, elderly subjects, healthcare workers, marginalized communities, and the known psychiatric patients apart from the general adult population.

Stigmatization, xenophobia, isolation, quarantine, loss of control over one's life, financial insecurities, ill health, and loneliness are the main factors that lead to psychological turmoil.

In case of medical professionals, feelings of vulnerability due to lack of definitive therapy and prevention, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, fear of infection, separation from family, overwork, assault from patients' relatives multiply overall stress and result in early burnout.

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The economic fall out of the pandemic is also of grave concern. Business closures, unemployment, and successive diminution of stock prices are creating unprecedented panic. People desperate for work are ignoring basic safety precautions which in turn may lead to further spread of the disease. All this is projected to bleed the development budget and push half a billion people into poverty.

However, simply delving into this dismal portrayal is not my intention. It is early to predict the long-term consequences and post-COVID devastation on the human body and psyche as the virus is about one year old. Still to sign off on a positive note, it is heartening to see that the death rate has decreased to less than 2% and the recovery rate also shows an upward swing from 75% in August to greater than 95% in December in our country. The vaccine with all its accompanying uncertainties is still the knight in shining armor promising to rescue mankind from its misery. Only time will tell how the tale ends,