

CoViD-19 Set to Become Necessary Evil Like Road Injuries

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A consensus seems to be developing around the word that the evil of new corona virus (SARS-nCov2) is going to stay amidst us and we have to learn to live with it. If so, a parallel can be drawn between this and the perpetual evil of road injuries in India.

The corona virus disease (CoViD-19) cases in India have exceeded 90,000 as of 17th May 2020 and deaths more than 3000. There is a general belief that lockdown has helped India to flatten the curve (1). India is now undergoing the fourth lockdown. Intensive discussion is on regarding the adverse economic consequences of the continued lockdown (2), particularly on daily wagers and roadside vendors. Considerable relaxation is now being given that may trigger a new wave of cases. However, with the strategy of tracing, testing and containment of the government (3) now in place, nobody expects a huge spike unless something unusual happens. Under the most adverse scenario, the cumulative number of cases may reach 2,76,000 at its peak (4) and a cumulative total of 500,000. At a maximum of 10 percent, the deaths could be nearly 50,000. The actual numbers may be much less but let us consider this most adverse scenario in this communication for comparison with road injuries.

These CoViD numbers look frightening but are much less when compared with similar suffering from road injuries. The government reported 1,51,417 deaths and additional 469,418 injuries in the year 2018 (5). The total, including deaths and survival, is 6,20,835. This is based on the reporting and the actual may be much higher. The Global Burden of disease study estimated 2,19,000 deaths in 2017 that would mean nearly 9,00,000 affected. Compared to this 2–3 years old data, the suffering in full year 2020 from CoVid under the worst case scenario is much less in terms of cases and less than one-third in terms of deaths.

No government can ever think of stopping the traffic on roads to curb road injuries and deaths. The only alternative is to be careful and follow the rules. The same is true for CoViD-19. This scourge can be allowed with watchful eyes and restrictions such as face masks. This disease has received disproportionate attention due to its severity in the West but, in our country, further restrictions do not seem necessary. The successive lockdowns have considerably helped to reduce the transmission and the numbers have not gone to millions, but there is no reason now to continue lockdown when the country is prepared to handle a large number of cases. Markets, factories, offices, construction activities, taxis, cars, pavement vendors, rickshaws, etc., should be fully allowed without restriction except for wearing effective

mask. Places with non-essential large gatherings such as cinema halls, religious places, parties, stadia, educational institutions, etc., can remain closed for some more time. All these, particularly airlines, can be allowed with no gap in seats when the travellers wear hazmat suit. This reduces the chances of infection by more than 99%. Air travellers can afford this expenditure. Such relaxation will surely increase the cases but we have to handle them with the medical facilities just as we handle nearly a million road injuries. Nearly 80% of CoViD cases are mild (6) and do not require any hospitalization. The most adverse scenario indicates that the load of CoViD-19 in India on medical care system is not likely to be as much as with road injuries.

There are other dimensions of the suffering from CoViD compared with vehicular injuries. Road injuries mostly take toll of young people whereas CoViD affects mostly old, particularly those with co-morbidities such as hypertension, diabetes and cancer. These people are vulnerable anyway – CoViD or no CoViD. Secondly, one positive feature of the lockdown has been steeply less casualty from road accidents. CoViD deaths, despite being high, may not be as many as saved by less traffic on roads during the lockdown.

The government is already on the way to ease the lockdown and to remove all the restrictions eventually. But the quicker the better so that the economy can start. We have to learn to live with CoViD with precautions such as face masks just as we do with road injuries with rules in place. Cases and deaths will occur but possibly much less than by road traffic.

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