Lack of Fear of COVID-19 among Pakistanis: Can we Expect a New Spike?

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Pakistan reported its first case of the novel coronavirus on February 26, 2020 (1) and saw it spread to its peak in June, with the number of daily cases hitting over 6,000 and overwhelming the country's healthcare system. A report by the Imperial College London predicted that the country could have 2,229,000 deaths by January 2021, if precautionary measures were not taken (2). While the government did impose a complete country-wide lockdown in March, it was soon lifted due to the immense economic loss suffered by local businesses and individual workers. Awareness continued to be raised about precautions such as hand washing, mask-wearing and social distancing through nationwide physical and media campaigns.

Recently Pakistan has since seen a dramatic decline in the number of cases to about 300 cases a day in late August (3). Multiple theories have tried to explain this miraculous decline, including the imposition of the smart lockdown system in May, the possibility of the presence of non-specific immunity from multiple vaccines that the population is exposed to, the increased humidity of the monsoon season, and the young population. A recent study by the Aga Khan University found that 95% of the people testing positive in Pakistan were asymptomatic, which may also explain the decrease in the number of cases reported (4).

It now seems that this decline has caused people to become complacent and ignorant of the still-present threat. Since the remaining lockdown restrictions were

lifted, the country has seen a steady uptick in the number of cases in the first few days of September; from 213 cases on August 30th to 513 on September 4th (5).

Many have voiced their opinions regarding the virus being a hoax, or only a threat to the elderly and no one else. Others believe that the increased recovery rate is indicative that the virus has become less threatening. Certain extremist groups have chosen to claim that the coronavirus is being used to drive Muslims away from their religion. But overall, many have chosen to believe that the virus just simply disappeared. Masks have therefore become a rare sight, while social gatherings and lack of hand hygiene have become more common.

Even though the authorities continue to warn the nation not to undermine the situation, as the possibility of a new spike is likely and might be as devastating, if not more, the general population seems to have moved on. Other countries in the world that saw their restrictions ease, such as Italy and Spain are now suffering their second waves. Israel has even imposed another country-wide lockdown (6).

In order to avoid such a situation in Pakistan, it would be necessary for everyone to continue to wear masks in public, practice hand hygiene and social distance, and for high-risk individuals to continue to self-isolate as much as possible. However, with educational institutes and wedding halls set to open, the fear remains clear as ever that we too may soon see a second wave.

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