



Under-reporting does hurt the COVID fight

Data for thought: Without good data, accurate projections are impossible, making it difficult to gauge the true state of the pandemic.

Highlights:

India, now home to the world's worst ongoing coronavirus pandemic, is currently reporting nearly a million new cases and 10,000 deaths every three days, according to data released by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. The true extent of the second wave now ravaging India is likely much worse than official numbers suggest.

The reasons

1. Research on the behavioural dynamics of COVID-19 from a group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology estimates the global under-reporting factor for cumulative cases around 7 and for deaths 1.4 as of December 2020.
2. In India, this problem seems to be particularly acute during the second wave based on empirical evidence and epidemiological models.
3. There could be several reasons why we cannot capture all COVID-19 infections such as silent asymptomatic infections, barriers to testing due to cost and travel time, reluctance to get tested due to COVID-19 associated stigma, limited availability of tests, obtaining a false negative test and alike.
4. Deaths related to COVID-19 that is missed often consist of deaths that happened outside healthcare facilities at home, and post-COVID-19 deaths where the cause of death is listed as pre-existing comorbidities such as heart disease or kidney failure.
5. India also has a poor and delayed infrastructure for reporting deaths and certifying the cause of death in general, particularly in the rural areas. In a 2017 estimate, one out of five deaths was medically reported.

Under-reporting impact:

1. Right now, the country is reeling from skyrocketing infection and death counts. This surge has thrown our healthcare systems off balance. Crucial medical supplies run dangerously low and hospitals are forced to turn away patients.



2. Forecasting models are used to predict the need for oxygen, hospital beds, intensive care unit care needs, the peak and duration of the pandemic. Without having more informative data, accurate projections are impossible. Knowing the truth is better for both public and policymakers to gauge the true state of the pandemic.
3. We should never forget that these numbers represent people. The official system can fail to capture the diseased and the deceased, but families cannot. The tragedies have unfolded in thousands of families in India.

A 'One Health' approach that targets people, animals

One Health: The father of modern pathology, Rudolf Virchow, emphasised in 1856 that there are essentially no dividing lines between animal and human medicine. This concept is ever more salient as the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic. Today we are acknowledging the interconnectedness of animals, humans, and the environment, an approach referred to as "One Health".

Across the species barrier

1. Studies indicate that more than two-thirds of existing and emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic or can be transferred between animals and humans, and vice versa when the pathogen in question originates in any life form but circumvents the species barrier. Another category of diseases, "anthropozoonotic" infections, gets transferred from humans to animals.
2. The transboundary impact of viral outbreaks in recent years such as the Nipah virus, Ebola, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Avian Influenza has further reinforced the need for us to consistently document the linkages between the environment, animals, and human health.

Indian initiatives towards One Health:

1. India's 'One Health' vision derives its blueprint from the agreement between the tripartite-plus alliance comprising the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the World Health Organization (WHO).

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2. In keeping with the long-term objectives, India established a National Standing Committee on Zoonoses as far back as the 1980s. And this year, funds were sanctioned for setting up a 'Centre for One Health' at Nagpur.
3. Further, the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying (DAHD) has launched several schemes to mitigate the prevalence of animal diseases.
4. Under the National Animal Disease Control Programme, ₹13,343 crores have been sanctioned for Foot and Mouth disease and Brucellosis control. In addition, DAHD will soon establish a 'One Health' unit within the Ministry.
5. Additionally, the government is working to revamp programmes that focus on capacity building for veterinarians and upgrading the animal health diagnostic system such as Assistance to States for Control of Animal Diseases (ASCAD).
6. In the revised component of assistance to States/Union Territories, there is increased focus on vaccination against livestock diseases and backyard poultry.
7. To this end, assistance will be extended to State biological production units and disease diagnostic laboratories.