

Patients with mental health disorders in the COVID-19 epidemic

More than 60 000 infections have been confirmed worldwide in the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) epidemic, with most of these cases in China. Global attention has largely been focused on the infected patients and the frontline responders, with some marginalised populations in society having been overlooked. Here, we write to express our concerns with regards to the effect of the epidemic on people with mental health disorders. Ignorance of the differential impact of the epidemic on these patients will not only hinder any aims to prevent further spread of COVID-19, but will also augment already existing health inequalities.

In China, 173 million people are living with mental health disorders,¹ and neglect and stigma regarding these conditions still prevail in society.² When epidemics arise, people with mental health disorders are generally more susceptible to infections for several reasons. First, mental health disorders can increase the risk of infections, including pneumonia.³ One report released on Feb 9, 2020, discussing a cluster of 50 cases of COVID-19 among inpatients in one psychiatric hospital in Wuhan, China, has raised concerns over the role of mental disorders in coronavirus transmission.⁴ Possible explanations include cognitive impairment, little awareness of risk, and diminished efforts regarding personal protection in patients, as well as confined conditions in psychiatric wards. Second, once infected with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2—which results in COVID-19—people with mental disorders can be exposed to more barriers in accessing timely health services, because of discrimination associated with mental ill-health in health-care settings. Additionally, mental health disorder comorbidities

to COVID-19 will make the treatment more challenging and potentially less effective.⁵ Third, the COVID-19 epidemic has caused a parallel epidemic of fear, anxiety, and depression. People with mental health conditions could be more substantially influenced by the emotional responses brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic, resulting in relapses or worsening of an already existing mental health condition because of high susceptibility to stress compared with the general population. Finally, many people with mental health disorders attend regular outpatient visits for evaluations and prescriptions. However, nationwide regulations on travel and quarantine have resulted in these regular visits becoming more difficult and impractical to attend.

Few voices of this large but vulnerable population of people with mental health disorders have been heard during this epidemic. Epidemics never affect all populations equally and inequalities can always drive the spread of infections. As mental health and public health professionals, we call for adequate and necessary attention to people with mental health disorders in the COVID-19 epidemic.

We declare no competing interests.

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