

## Covid-19 Pandemic: A Destructive Coronavirus Demands a Drastic Approach?

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In Europe and around the world, the covid-19 pandemic has taken everyone by sheer surprise. In January 2020, there was no conversation at all of a coronavirus epidemic and with a contagiousity of 2,5, by the end of march, more than 1 billion people have been confined at home worldwide in an effort to contain the pandemic which has already infected 380,000 people and claimed 23,000 lives [1]. The situation in Europe and the USA has especially been calamitous compared to Asian countries, that were spared the heavy burden of death, with the exception of China. At the end of march, the curve of the propagation is now exponential with the peak still to be reached in countries outside Asia, whereas in Asia, a de-escalation of quarantine and emergency plans have been initiated.

The failure of politics has been especially notable, which along with a very open movement of people, has accelerated the propagation of the epidemic to the catastrophic situation not seen since the global pandemic of the Spanish flu early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The situation of shortage of masks in Belgium where millions of FFP2 masks ordered never arrived, along with a poor distribution of surgical masks to caregivers in first line both inside and outside hospital, has highlighted how a poor political will in the end will cost lives.

The US is now the country with the highest number of infected patients in the world at the end of march. There has been a long period of uncertainty surrounding the epidemic over there, coupled with delay in putting together confinement and emergency measures, largely political in nature and preventable. This ambiguity between pro-confinement and pro-economy, singularly spearheaded by the president, who refuses to make the decision of a national confinement measure, leaving it to the states to decide, will have a disastrous effect on the capacity of the system to absorb the peak of the epidemic, which is estimated in two weeks.

The strategy of herd immunity, chosen by the Dutch government and to a certain extent by the British government before a late change of plan in front of an escalating situation in the country with the NHS squeezed thin, relies on the principle that once enough people get Covid-19, it will stop spreading on its own. But the costs will be devastating with billions infected and millions killed [2]. This strategy relies on waiting until enough people get it and become immune that it will fizzle out on its own as the virus finds it more and more laborious to find a new susceptible host [2]. The projected number of people infected at this rate would be about 60% of the world's population for covid-19. The consequences of going for this route without a containment strategy would be horrendous as a spike in the number of severely ill people needing hospital treatment would overflow the inpatient capacity and eventually result in preventable deaths.

Together with a failure of political will, in the example of Belgium, the measures of confinement put in place have either not been understood by the population and hence compliance has not been optimal, or there is disrespect for the measures. Fines have been applied in Italy and France where confinement has been near total, except for work and shopping for basic supplies. In Belgium, there is possibility to go out for a jog or walk, two people maximum at a time for maximum an hour. The situation is far from being stringently respected.

The strategy of confinement, when not respected, makes it more difficult to contain the epidemic which will add to the burden and make it more difficult to flatten the peak we are expected to see. These measures have not been enough.

The absence of selective testing and confinement, as well as the strategy of herd immunity followed to different degrees by the United States and the big European countries, as well as the UK, with the exception of Germany where a show of political will combined with aggressive testing and selective confinement has resulted in very low levels of death in spite of significant infection rate. Western countries, except Germany, contrast with neighbouring countries of China namely South Korea, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan in the way they have dealt with the epidemic. In Asia, their experience with SARS in 2003 and H1N1 in 2009 has proved very useful as they put forward a strategy of early testing as well as selective confinement with the use of up-to-date technology using big data to identify people at risk coming into the country, testing them, putting them on quarantine and monitoring them using phone apps. They have been able to radically control the spread of the disease. These measures have been successful in containment and, in doing so have spared a collapse of the economy. In fact, there seems to be consternation in those countries in front of the laxity of the measures of confinement even today in Italy, which is most severely hit in the world. The situation there warrants a radical approach.

Preventive measures have to be reinforced. It is not enough to do the minimum of confinement without strict social distancing, preventive washing and disinfection of hands and surfaces. Asian countries are a step further with broad application of preventive surgical masks. The strict disciplinarian approach has worked in those countries. Collective immunity through infection and cure will be difficult to achieve until the arrival of a vaccine which would be a big step forward toward prevention. Nevertheless, this is not going to be available before next year, and will take time before worldwide immunization. Hence, prevention is the biggest weapon against covid-19 at the moment to try and flatten the curve as much as possible, and a radical approach is the only way forward.

Lastly, a world-wide coordination would be more effective than each one going at it, one nation at a time in what is a common adversary. China has been forthcoming which is noteworthy. Their efforts to curb the growth of the epidemic has been remarkable. But there has to be more transparency as the numbers coming out of Wuhan do not seem plausible considering how the numbers that are spreading around the world. India has also taken a radical approach in proposing a 21-day confinement of the entire country of 1,3 billion people. The fight is now a fight for our common humanity and we should join forces in an unprecedented and radical manner [3,4].

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