

Letter to the Editor

Identification of Patients With Schizophrenia: Immediate Action to Control COVID-19 Pandemic in Iran



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1. Dear Editor

The characteristics of schizophrenia, including delusions, hallucinations, poor insight, cognitive impairment, and disorganized behavior [1] and demographic characteristics including homelessness and living in communal homes [1] have provided the basis for COVID-19 infection in patients with schizophrenia. Due to impairments in insight and decision-making capacity, people with schizophrenia are less likely to adhere to protective measures [2].

Medical comorbidity is the norm rather than the exception in schizophrenia. More than 70% of patients with schizophrenia have one or more clinical conditions [3] including chronic pulmonary disease [4], high blood pressure [5], and diabetes type II [6]. In case of the need for hospitalization in care unit admissions, regardless of the cause, they are at greater risk for acute organ dysfunction [7]. It is also estimated that smoking in patients with schizophrenia is 40% to 90% [8], which can increase the risk of progression and severe complications of COVID-19 infection [9]. On the other hand, social distancing, which is an important measure to control COVID-19, has added an additional toll on schizophrenic patients [10] because individuals with schizophrenia

have smaller and poorer-quality social networks than the general population [11]. Also, coronavirus infection may aggravate the psychotic symptoms [12] and even cause symptoms of schizophrenia. The dysregulated immune system is a potential mechanism linking schizophrenia to more severe COVID-19 infection [13-15]. It has also been reported that clozapine, as the only approved drug resistant to treatment of schizophrenia [16] is associated with an increased risk of COVID-19 infection [17]. This set of factors has made schizophrenia a highly vulnerable and risk group for COVID-19. Accordingly, Bitan et al. showed that people with schizophrenia were twice more likely to be hospitalized due to COVID-19 and three times more likely to experience COVID-19 mortality compared to controls [18]. What makes the situation more critical is that individuals with schizophrenia are less likely to be vaccinated than the general population [19]. Even the effectiveness of vaccination on severe mental illness is questionable [20]. Also, patients with COVID-19 schizophrenia are less likely to be admitted to the intensive care unit due to discrimination [21].

In Iran, many patients with schizophrenia have abandoned their treatments for reasons such as lack of knowledge and understanding of the nature of their disease, fear of COVID-19, lack of adequate infrastructure for

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telemedicine, and psychological effects of social isolation, which can be very worrying for the health of the community and the creation of subsequent waves. Accordingly, due to the high statistical population of people with schizophrenia, their role in the spread of the COVID-19 epidemic, the disobedience of the protective measures of COVID-19, and the serious consequences of COVID-19 on the health system and the country's economy, it is necessary for health authorities to take special measures to prevent and treat COVID-19 in patients with schizophrenia. Also, the families of many schizophrenic patients have a socioeconomic vulnerability that has forced them to prioritize budgets for household affairs. Due to the cognitive impairment of people with schizophrenia, this issue has led to tension, destruction, and reduction of interpersonal and family relationships.

2. Conclusion

Due to the limited access and shortage of medicines, including psychiatric medicine in Iran, intensified by US economic sanctions and drastically reduced therapists' treatment choices, international organizations, including the Red Crescent and the World Health Organization, are requested to take urgent action to provide the needed medicine.

Given that many psychotic patients have abandoned treatment and have doubts about the effectiveness of vaccination, it is recommended that the Ministry of Health of the Islamic Republic of Iran prioritize the treatment of schizophrenic patients to prevent future mutations of the COVID-19 virus.

It should be noted that these patients should be vaccinated with the vaccines that have the highest immunogenicity approved by the World Health Organization.

Since many people with schizophrenia have low socioeconomic status, they refer to public hospitals. It is requested that appropriate infrastructure be provided for telemedicine and e-mental health in public hospitals. Also, financial aid is necessary to provide medicine and the necessities of life.

It is recommended to reopen private mental health clinics and monitor the patients to provide specialized services and reduce patient traffic in public hospitals.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

There were no ethical considerations to be considered in this research.

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Authors' contributions

Conceptualization and Supervision: Mohammad Reza Mousavi; Methodology: Mohammad Reza Mousavi; Investigation, Writing—original draft, and Writing—review & editing: Both authors; Funding acquisition and Resources: Mohammad Reza Mousavi.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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