

# **Report on WHO SEARO Webinar “COVID 19 pandemic: Disruption of essential health services for older people, mitigation measures for restoration and emerging challenges”**

**Date: 4 June 2021**

**Time: 12:30- 15:00**

**No of participants: 35**

## **Background**

The WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia of has been providing technical support to the Member States on various aspects of COVID-19 prevention and management since the beginning of the pandemic. The pandemic has affected the older population severely. In addition to high risk of contacting the infection and case fatality, disruption of health services due to restrictions in the form of lockdown has also affected essential care of non-communicable diseases, mental health and long-term care.

To address the challenges of ongoing COVID 19 pandemic and emerging issues related to its containment, a webinar “COVID 19 pandemic: Disruption of essential health services for older people, mitigation measures for restoration and emerging challenges” was organized on 4<sup>th</sup> June by the Department of Reproductive, Maternal, Newborn, Child & Adolescent Health and Ageing (MCA) with the overall objectives of guiding the WHO Country Offices in supporting Member States on various challenges of the pandemic.

## **Objectives of the Webinar**

1. To review the experience of disruption and mitigation measures for restoration of essential health services for older people during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020;
2. To support Member States in addressing the emerging challenges for prevention of COVID-19 transmission and maintenance of essential health services for older people during the pandemic;
3. To share the updated global guidelines and materials on COVID-19 in older people.

## **Agenda of the Webinar**

12.30 hrs	Welcome address and objectives	Dr Neena Raina
12.40 hrs	Burden of pandemic: impact on Older people	Dr Aarti Garg
12.50 hrs	WHO HQ Guidance on COVID 19 pandemic	Dr Anshu Banerjee/Dr Yuka Sumi
13.00 hrs	Review of disruption of healthy ageing services and mitigation measures in SEA Region	Dr A B Dey
13.10 hrs	COVID 19 and Older Population BMGF Survey	Dr Anoma Jayathilaka
13.20 hrs	Assessment of essential health care services for older People during COVID 19 pandemic	Healthy Ageing India
13.30 hrs	Discussion and experience sharing on WCOs on Challenges of COVID 19	Ageing focal persons in WCO
14.30 hrs	Closing remarks and way forward	Dr Neena Raina

### **Introductory remarks- SA-MCA**

Dr Neena Raina SA/MCA welcomed the participants and invitees from WHO HQ and colleagues from WHE to the webinar with an overview of impact of the pandemic on older population from available data and personal experience. She emphasized that the pandemic has impacted lives and livelihoods of millions and the disruptions in essential health services for healthy ageing was severe in the early part of the pandemic in every countries along with uncertain treatment protocols. She noted, however, that most countries have initiated steps to mitigate the hardships by putting in place access to essential services with innovative alternatives and technologies. As a part of the pandemic initiative, the Regional Office mapped the disruption of services as well as mitigation measures in the early part of the pandemic through a collaborative effort associating UN partner UNFPA and civil society partner HelpAge International and the observations of the exercise would be presented in this webinar.

With advent of vaccines, which have been approved by WHO and made available to low and middle income countries through COVAX vaccine distribution initiative, Dr Raina hoped the pandemic can be contained to a great extent if other public health social measures are followed diligently. She, however, expressed her concern that mass vaccination would be challenging, as vaccine availability remains a problem area along with hesitancy and logistics of reaching out to older population, though they are on priority list of vaccination.

Dr Raina informed that a questionnaire has been circulated to all WCOs prior to this webinar to identify various challenges that may arising in near future in maintaining essential services for healthy ageing along with mitigation measures; and mass vaccination program.

She invited Dr Aarti Garg from WHE Division to present the current state of the pandemic and its impact on older population.

### **Burden of pandemic: impact on Older people-Dr Aarti Garg**

Dr Aarti Garg provided an exhaustive account on the COVID 19 pandemic in the world with a special focus on SEA Region and older population. She presented global and regional figures for cases and case fatality along with various other aspects of the pandemic namely; various strains of SARS CoV2 virus that is causing the surge in different SEA countries, along with death rates, containment measures and their impact on older people, and response measures from select SEA countries such as Thailand and Nepal. She hoped that public health social measures along with application of technology for mitigation are essential for controlling the pandemic. She recommended several measures, such as health system strengthening; strict enforcement of public health laws; and multi-sectoral and multidisciplinary approach as a necessity for successful implementation of public health social measures of pandemic control.

### **WHO HQ Remarks -Dr Anshu Banerjee**

Dr Anshu Banerjee reiterated the point made earlier that the impact of the pandemic had been overwhelming affecting every family, community and country in the world; while those above 80 years were at the highest risk of death; the adolescents locked down in home had significant mental health challenges; whereas economically large majority of global population suffered. He pointed out that the vulnerability of the essential health services for older population was exposed by the pandemic and WHO would be striving hard in coming years to guide Member States to address the concerns of older population. He concluded his talk by referring to observation of the UN Decade of the Healthy Ageing which was initiated by WHO in 2020. He urged WCOs to guide the Member States to actively pursue the Decade goals which would be of great benefit to older population.

### **WHO HQ Guidance on COVID 19 pandemic-Dr Yuka Sumi**

Dr Yuka Sumi made a presentation of current state of guidance by WHO HQ on COVID 19 pandemic and older population. She quoted extensively from available data on the pandemic and informed that older people diagnosed with COVID-19 are 10 times more likely to die of COVID than other population groups. She noted that older people who are the residents of LTCF with poor IPC measures; are susceptible to severe COVID-19 due to multi-morbidity. In older population; “atypical symptoms” may be confused as asymptomatic and pre-symptomatic cases and important time window will be lost in seeking health care. She informed that 7 out of 10 COVID-19 deaths reported in older people aged 65 years or over (as of 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021). In older persons COVID-19 can result in prolonged illness and persistent symptoms such as fatigue, exhaustion, cognitive dysfunction, anxiety, depression, shortness of breath, and persistent coughing. These symptoms also occur in younger adults though much milder. She noted that the treatment strategy should be person centred with drugs recommended by WHO along with adoption of WHO Mild COVID 19 Home care bundle for mild disease. She emphasized that while focusing on pandemic management, Member States also need to strengthen mental health care, NCD management, and adult immunization; support and training for caregivers; place greater focus on Long-term care (LTC) services while preventing social isolation and strengthen palliative care within health and LTC Services.

### **Review of disruption of healthy ageing services and mitigation measures in SEA Region-Dr A B Dey**

Dr AB Dey provided a summary of mapping survey on mitigation of disrupted essential services during early phase of the pandemic. He reported that COVID 19 pandemic swept through all Member States with the exception of DPR Korea in 2020 with Bangladesh, India and Indonesia contributed to large majority of cases and fatality in terms of number in SEA Region, though all Member States had to respond to the pandemic with public health interventions, policies and programs. He noted that prior to the pandemic all Member States had policies and programmes for older people and during the pandemic all had strategy/plan for COVID 19 management and some public health intervention or the other was carried out by them. No country had total lockdown in the health system though long term care was partially disrupted. All Member States carried out some form of remedial and mitigation measures which provided relief to the older population. He noted that civil society participation in mitigation was noteworthy in most Member States. He reported that WHO/ other UN Agencies supported Member States who expected technical support during the course of pandemic and thereafter for future planning of similar epidemics and old age care.

### **COVID 19 and Older Population BMGF Survey -Dr Anoma Jayathilaka**

Dr Anoma Jayathilaka presented observations from BMGF supported project on mitigating the indirect impact of COVID -19 on maternal, newborn, child, adolescent and ageing population. She informed that the overall aim of the project was to support country efforts to prevent additional increases in mortality, morbidity, malnutrition, mental and physical ill health for pregnant women, mothers, children, adolescents and older people, maintaining levels of service delivery as close as possible to those prior to the pandemic, in 20 countries across five WHO regions; while the specific objectives were to ensure continued access and coverage of essential services for MNCAAH; and to adopt strategies to prevent decreases in the utilization of essential services for MNCAAH. She discussed the detailed methodology of the project in phase 1 and informed that phase 2 of the project is in planning stage involving three SEA Member States. The project while gaining experience from the countries with wide variations in health system functioning and also focused on their strengthening.

## **Assessment of essential health care services for older people during COVID 19 pandemic -Healthy Ageing India, Dr Prasun Chatterjee**

Dr Prasun Chatterjee presented the results of the APW on development and field testing of tools for assessment of essential health care services for older people during COVID-19 pandemic. The survey was carried out in an urban location (Delhi), a rural site in Ramanagara in Karnataka, and a tribal area in Ranchi, Jharkhand; involving community dwelling older people and their care givers, old age home residents and managers; and policy makers and program managers. He provided details of the survey which examined policies, programs, disruptions, mitigation measures etc. He summarized that awareness among the policy makers, hospital administrators, state coordinators, COVID nodal officers and the program managers about national policies and plans for older people as poor; variable impact of lockdown in old age homes compared to own home in community; lower frequency of COVID in LTCFs in India, complex and difficult health social issues for older population irrespective of living arrangement. He observed minimal intervention from most of stakeholders to mitigate anxiety, social isolation, elder abuse during the pandemic; and he concluded that there is need for more concerted, collaborative and multi-stakeholders approach towards older people to add value to their life both during and after the pandemic

### **Presentations from WCOs**

Dr Lobzang Dorji presented **Bhutan's** experience with the pandemic. Bhutan had a cumulative figure of 1654 cases on 3<sup>rd</sup> June and had experienced two lockdowns with geographic variability in degree of restrictions. Essentials health services were disrupted with mitigation measures from the Government. Telemedicine was promoted and older people were placed in the priority list of State help and support was provided at door step. Bhutan had put in place a national COVID 19 management protocol which effectively provided complete and comprehensive care to all cases irrespective of severity. In the vaccination front Bhutan has vaccinated 94% of the population, including older people.

Dr Atreyi Ganguli presented **India's** experience with the pandemic. India has been experiencing large number of cases and deaths since beginning of the pandemic. National lockdown was declared in March 2020 which resulted in extensive disruption of essential health services along with total economic shutdown. For providing mitigation from disruption of essential services, guidelines were announced periodically. Management protocols for clinical care, mental health support protocols, exclusive care centers, additional funding from CSR donations and crowd funding, involvement of civil society in supporting the most affected segment of the society etc, evolved over short period of time for providing relief to people. Two vaccine manufacturers are providing vaccine for the 18+ population being funded by Government of India. For those who can access private sector care, 25% of vaccine is made available at a regulated price. At this point of time over 200 million people have received at least one dose of vaccine. Old age care is a priority in Health and Wellness Center of *Ayushman Bharat* Program with protocols and training programs announced recently. The Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment is the nodal Ministry for old age care which is a multi-sector and multi stake holder activity with prominent involvement of civil society organizations.

Dr Itsnaeni Abbas presented **Indonesia's** experience with the pandemic. Indonesia has reported very high number of cases and case fatality which is a matter of concern for the country. She provided details of older population, old age care at PHC level, long term care, disruption of services and

mitigation measures by the various Ministries of the Government. She proposed to send another report in near future.

Dr Aye Myat Soe presented **Myanmar's** experience with the pandemic. Myanmar has reported over 40,000 COVID 19 cases. The country had put in place several measures for mitigation of hardships from lockdown including financial help. With gradual normalization of civil life after recent political turmoil, the health system has started functioning with case detection, isolation and treatment processes. Healthy ageing services which had been disrupted is gaining ground with better resources.

Dr Pooja Pradhan presented **Nepal's** experience with the pandemic. Nepal after a recent surge in cases is witnessing decline in numbers. Older population has been provided priority care; and mitigation measures are in place along with protocols for clinical and health system management. LTC in Nepal is mostly home based and old age homes are very few in number; and thus COVID 19 in LTCF is not a significant issue in Nepal.

Dr Virginie Mallawaarachchi presented **Sri Lanka's** experience with the pandemic. There were over 89000 cases. 80% of deaths were in older persons. Sri Lanka had addressed health service disruption issues effectively with defined protocols for health and social services. The vaccination program is progressing with some disruptions due to non-availability of vaccine.

**Concluding remarks: Dr Neena Raina**

Dr Neena Raina SA/MCA applauded the efforts of WCOs and Ageing focal points in guiding Member States in COVID 19 management. She summarized some of the innovation in various Member States and emphasized the need for their documentation. She focused on a repeat review of mitigation strategies for essential health services for health ageing during the recent surge in infection in SEA Region. She also emphasized the need for supporting vaccination program against COVID 19. She proposed a webinar on COVID 19 vaccination challenges in collaboration with IVD division focusing on older population.

She thanked all participants for their enthusiastic participation and closed the meeting.