LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Mental Health and the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Call for Action

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Abstract: The current COVID-19 pandemic is likely to affect the physical and mental health and the well-being of people globally. The physicians and nurses on the frontline of patients care will be among the most affected in their psychosocial well-being, being exposed to trauma consequences and burnout syndrome. It is still unknown whether the COVID-19 infection will have direct neuropsychiatric consequences. The impact of the quarantine lockdown on mental health, too, has to be taken into account. The inclusion of mental health as part of national public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic is mandatory in assisting all those in need.

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Dear Editor,

It is well known that COVID-19 affects not only physical health but also mental health and well-being of people globally [1]. For its impact on health and well-being and its social and economic consequences, this pandemic can be compared with natural disasters, such as earthquakes or tsunami [2], or with international massive armed conflicts. Slowly but surely, COVID-19 will become the biggest mental health problem on the international level, and the consequences on the mental health will be enormous.

The authors consider that people with existing mental health problems are among the most vulnerable category, together with the infected and ill patients, their families, and health staff involved in the treatment. In this regard, social media with the sensational headlines and rumors, despite the lack of sources for real information do significantly cause additional harm by creating a sense of threat, discomfort, panic, etc. which increases the risks of occurrence and resurfacing of the mental health disorders [3].

Concurrently, the health workers, who are currently carrying the biggest burden of today, are at the greatest risk of burnout syndrome being exposed. Indeed, they are exposed to high levels of stress due to a large number of working hours without sufficient rest, as well as the lack of adequate personal protective equipment in most of the countries severely affected by COVID-19. Furthermore, doctors and nurses that are on the frontline of coronavirus patients care will likely be among the most affected in their mental health and psychosocial well-being [4].

Aside from this, the loss of smell, along with the loss of taste, anosmia and dysgeusia, manifests itself in the early stages of the coronavirus-induced disease or occurs in patients with mild or no symptoms [5]. This suggests the possible relationship and direct neuropsychiatric consequences of the infection.

There should also be considered the impact of the quarantine lockdown, which was resorted to by many governments as the most effective measure to prevent the spread of the infection in the population. In general, social isolation, loneliness, and social distancing have major effects on people's mental health, resulting in increased stress, anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide attempts [6].

The foreseen economic consequences of the quarantine lockdown will also have a likely impact on the mental health and well-being of the population. Financial problems and unemployment will be the main factors in the worsening of the population’s mental health where quarantine directly or indirectly has a foreseeable impact on physical health and well-being. Reduced exposure to the sun and vitamin D, reduced activity and increased sedentary, poor nutrition, less social relationships and longer duration of the quarantine was associated in past studies with poorer mental health, symptoms of the post-traumatic stress, anger and atypical behaviors [7].

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and well-being will be enormous.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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