

## IPS initiatives in COVID 19 pandemic

### Dr P K Dalal

Head, Department of Psychiatry  
King George Medical College, Lucknow, India  
(President Elect: Indian Psychiatric Society)



The COVID 19 pandemic has overwhelmed health systems and caused global social and economic disruption. India reported its first COVID 19 case on January 30, 2020. The Indian government promptly initiated preventive measures to contain the spread of COVID 19. As on July 17, 2020, there are 342473 active cases with more than 1 million total COVID 19 cases in India<sup>(1)</sup>. The rise of COVID-19 pandemic saw a variety of reactions ranging from fear, apprehension to denial.

This unprecedented situation has posed a multitude of challenges for the government, healthcare stakeholders and the general public. The COVID 19 pandemic has already taken a toll on the psychological and emotional health of persons<sup>(2)</sup>. As the largest national organisation of Psychiatrists in India with more than 7000 active members<sup>(3)</sup>, the Indian Psychiatric Society (IPS) has proactively collaborated with national and international agencies to understand the emerging mental health challenges amid COVID 19 pandemic and come forth with solutions. The mental healthcare needs in various stages of pandemic vary in different populations. The IPS has incorporated general measures and at the same time, worked strategically to prioritise its efforts for specific populations.

The IPS acknowledged the challenges that persons with mental health issues, healthcare workers and psychiatrists may face in the wake of COVID 19 pandemic through the IPS President's message and formulated a plan to reset its priorities<sup>(4)</sup>. The IPS called out to all members to work in their measure and collectively to come forth with a courage and resilience mind-set. The IPS advised its members to follow safety norms and work at the grass-root level to deliver mental healthcare services uninterruptedly.

The IPS further issued a general advisory for the public which emphasised the safety measures, places to seek the right information, managing stress in social distancing, quarantine, and lockdown and positive mental health in times of COVID 19<sup>(5)</sup>.

As the government went ahead with lockdown and social distancing protocols, the IPS exercised excellent foresight and promptly issued its position statement on the mental health needs of the community<sup>(6)</sup>. IPS position statement to the government, highlighted the vital role of emotional health at all stages of the pandemic and in all groups of the population. The IPS position statement further proposed strategies to mitigate the emotional impact of the behavioural changes, the care of the persons experiencing distress and the care of pre-existing mental disorders with a firm resolve to work hand in hand with the people and the government.

The lockdown posed unique challenges for deaddiction services. The restriction to access of care and follow up may increase the risk of relapse. Keeping this in view the IPS came up with guidelines to re-strategise the existing Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) services to ensure the availability and access to services in the face of various structural and attitudinal problems. These guidelines

focused on the management of OST centres, dispensing and supply maintenance of the scheduled drugs<sup>(7)</sup>.

The IPS researched to understand the mental health aspects of COVID 19 so that new evidence can be produced regarding needs, vulnerabilities and intervention effectiveness. Some of these studies are already slated for publication<sup>(8,9)</sup>. IPS online survey on the psychological impact of lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic found that after the start of the first phase of lockdown in India, prevalence of anxiety rose to 38.5%, that of depression to 9.5% and both anxiety and depression to 40%. Nearly 70% of respondents experienced negative well-being and stress<sup>(9)</sup>. Another study, by IPS focusing on mental health issues faced by health care workers involved in COVID-19 treatment, found that 45.9%, 13.5% and 12.9% of healthcare workers experienced anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts respectively<sup>(8)</sup>. Compared with the prevalence of anxiety, depression and suicidality from National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) 2015-16, the rates of psychiatric illness have risen manifolds<sup>(10)</sup>. These findings give us valuable insights into the psychological sequelae of the COVID 19 pandemic and have enormous implications for healthcare workers and policymakers.

The IPS collaborated with the Department of Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences (NIMHANS) to prepare guidance for Psychiatrists for safe practice catering to different settings amidst COVID 19 pandemic. This included recommendations for rearranging practice settings and establishing telemedicine consultations. It addressed the needs of children/adolescents, geriatric, perinatal populations and rehabilitation settings<sup>(11)</sup>.

Children and adolescents have varying needs at different developmental stages when it comes to mental health. The IPS advisory for mental health professionals included a special section on mental health challenges in this population and advised for parents and psychiatrists to identify and manage the same. Art can be an effective medium to create awareness and stimulate the brain in coming up with new ideas. IPS community psychiatry speciality section organised an online essay writing competition to engage the young minds and actively create awareness and explore the novel ideas the children themselves can come up with on the topic minding our minds during lockdown<sup>(12)</sup>. The IPS Task-force for Creativity and Mental Health organised a unique creative choreography contest for classical dancers on the themes of emotional issues faced during crises like COVID-19 to create awareness<sup>(13)</sup>.

Under the aegis of IPS, Mental health professionals across the country came together to provide voluntary online telemedicine services for all mental health issues in the time of this crisis<sup>(14)</sup>.

Through its various electronic, print and social media platforms and programs, IPS Mental Health Matters campaign, engaged with the community and tried to address the emerging issue, small and large.

As the in-person patient care became limited due to lockdown restrictions, the government of India for the first time came up with formal telemedicine guidelines. To assist, educate and provide guidance to psychiatrists in setting up, implementation, administration and provision of telepsychiatry services, IPS reviewed the guidelines and in collaboration with NIMHANS and the Indian Telemedicine Society drafted operational guidelines<sup>(15)</sup> to facilitate uninterrupted mental health care delivery. Further, the IPS advocated for the inclusion of Clonazepam, Clobazam and Phenobarbitone in the lists of the schedule of telemedicine drugs, which were earlier not included in the telemedicine prescription list. The IPS organised online discussions among various stakeholders to further review and find strategies to further refine the telepsychiatry practice.

Understanding the Psychiatrists' need to be proactive in reaching out to the vulnerable sections of society, the IPS produced a guideline document entitled Preventing Suicides during COVID - Role of Psychiatrist<sup>(16)</sup>. It discussed the issues related to suicide prevention strategies and the role of psychiatrists in the time of the pandemic.

As our reliance on online services increases due to most organisations resorting to work and learn from home models, increased screen exposure is an essential evil. Digital well-being is more important than ever before. In an endeavour to educate the public on the harmful effects of the cyberspace, the IPS came up with evidence-based "Recommendations For Screen Use" for different age groups<sup>(17)</sup>.

IPS understands the need for ongoing education and academic activities and has actively pursued newer ways for the dissemination of knowledge and research-based on web platforms. IPS Odisha State Branch conducted an International Webinar on Schizophrenia on the occasion of World Schizophrenia day, which hosted world-renowned psychiatrists as speakers. Various subspecialty sections of IPS also led webinars and panel discussions on psychotherapy, sexual disorders, child and adolescent health issues and telepsychiatry. To ensure and maintain adequate standards in psychiatry training at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in medicine, the IPS drafted recommendations for possible solutions titled, "Suggestions for Undergraduate and postgraduate training in psychiatry during COVID-19 crisis and near future"<sup>(18)</sup>.

Members of IPS lead psychiatry departments of leading institutions and mental hospitals. The IPS members actively undertook the training of doctors and allied healthcare workers before and after COVID duties promoting positive mental health and preparedness. They further provided counselling and psychological support during their isolation and quarantine duties.

The IPS is determined to convert this challenge into an opportunity for growth of science and psychiatry. We are committed to protecting the human rights of individuals with mental disorders. Through coordinated efforts and exchange of information with World Psychiatric Association (WPA) and SAARC Psychiatric Federation (SPF), the IPS actively engaged with various stakeholders in modifying the response strategies. We served as an example and

also learned from other models of response, how to best manage our mental healthcare resources to limit psychiatric morbidity due to COVID 19 pandemic.

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