

25th Collegium Ramazzini Statement

Prevention of work-related COVID-19 infection in low-income and middle-income countries: need for a global response

Collegium Ramazzini

The Collegium Ramazzini is an independent, international society comprised of 180 physicians and scientists from 35 countries. Its mission is to increase scientific knowledge of the environmental and occupational causes of disease and to transmit this knowledge to decision-makers, the media and the global public to prevent disease, promote health and save lives.

The Collegium Ramazzini has issued a Statement (Risk 2020) on principles and best practices to protect workers and workplaces from COVID-19 infection. Recognizing that in many low-income and middle-income countries implementation of these practices will prove challenging, the Collegium Ramazzini now calls attention to the urgent need for a much expanded global public health infrastructure to prevent and contain COVID-19 infection among workers in all countries of the world.

The spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has been relentless, and deaths have been reported in virtually all countries. The pandemic is spreading especially rapidly in many low-income and middle-income countries (LMICs). These countries have high population densities, limited resources, and large informal employment sectors. They contain approximately 69% of all persons globally aged 60 years or more (Lloyd-Sherlock et al. 2020).

As in all countries, workers in LMICs whose occupations potentially put them in contact with infected persons and the public are at greatly increased risk of COVID-19 infection. However, many LMICs find it very challenging to protect high-risk workers against COVID-19 infection and to implement recommended best practices. Specific problems include limited possibility of physical distancing in neighborhoods and workplaces, lack of information on how the virus spreads, and lack of clean water and soap for hand washing. These problems are magnified for migrant workers, temporary workers and women workers. A group at particularly elevated risk of COVID-19 infection are workers in the informal sector who provide essential support to medical services and yet have little or no knowledge or protective equipment.

Many LMICs do not have strong medical services, public health systems or occupational health and safety programs in the best of times and cannot now compete against high-income countries in the fight for scarce, yet essential resources (Walker et al. 2020). Further, many LMICs have limited administrative protections, social insurance, or unemployment systems to protect workers against workplace lockdowns, isolation and quarantine. These issues are compounded by a lack of proper personal protective equipment including respirators, face shields, protective eyewear, protective clothing and gowns and surgical/procedure masks. Safeguards against COVID-19 infection are especially lacking for workers in the informal sector who receive no information about the disease, little or no safety training, and have no established communications network.

To overcome these inequitable barriers to containing the COVID-19 pandemic and to protect the health of workers, many LMICs require urgent assistance from high-income countries and the international community.

To meet this global challenge, the Collegium Ramazzini calls on all countries, international organizations, philanthropic donors and the global community to act collectively to protect the health of workers in LMICs:

Accept that all countries are in the COVID-19 pandemic together. Now is not the time for isolationism. Global cooperation cannot collapse at a time when the only logical solution to controlling this pandemic is to come together for the common good and to act as one.

Recognize that spread of the COVID-19 pandemic is closely related to work, and that if work is not performed safely and workers are not protected, workplaces will contribute to the continuing spread of disease. Leadership at the highest level of government is crucial in quickly averting the worst outcomes of this pandemic (Lancet 2020) .

Recognize that the COVID-19 pandemic differentially affects workers in low-income and middle-income countries. Workers in LMICS, and especially workers in the informal sector, are at disproportionately high risk of acquiring COVID-19 infection and of dying from the disease because of the conditions of their work; the lack of strong medical services, public health systems, and occupational health and safety systems; lack of education about the disease; and lack of personal protective equipment (PPE). The COVID-19 pandemic creates devastating conditions for workers in LMICs, and spread of infection within workplaces leads to accelerated spread of disease within workers' communities and families.

Understand that the COVID-19 pandemic, like all pandemics plays out locally, and that to protect people against disease there must be sustained investment in all countries in community health services. International agencies must provide LMICs with resources and technical assistance that enable these countries to develop appropriate and trusted community health systems. Resources must be provided to sustainably support health care workers who can respond to health crises, inform the community about best practices to prevent risk and avoid infection, protect the vulnerable, and collect essential data. The building of sustainable community health systems in LMICS is not as glamorous as programs designed to eradicate single diseases, but is much more effective in achieving lasting improvements in health.

Acknowledge and react to the worldwide shortages of essential supplies, including proper medical supplies, medical screening equipment and laboratories, and personal protective equipment. Further, the global community must assist in the supply and distribution chains in LMICs.

Although there were countless warnings, most of the world was not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic. The global community must now overcome this lack of preparation and act decisively to contain the next wave of this pandemic, and to protect against the pandemic that will come after this one. Pandemic preparedness requires recognition of the high risk of global spread of infection in today's highly interconnected world. It requires massive, sustained investment in global public health, occupational health, and local health infrastructures so that these services reach every community and every workplace in every country in the world.

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