

COVID-19 and Responsible Conduct of Research

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Short Communication

COVID-19 has emerged as one of the largest pandemic of century, with 15 785 641 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 640 016 deaths, reported by WHO to date [1]. It has revealed that the world was clearly not ready for the surprise. The emergency response encompassed massive efforts to ensure health care delivery. Since research is established as obligatory part of emergency response, a sizeable surge in research testing new therapeutic agents, vaccines or other interventions was witnessed. To date around 2782 studies are registered looking at COVID-19 at clinical trials.gov [2]. Researchers felt responsibility and obligation to act fast, and pressure to discover remedies to bring relief to public. To keep pace with this, ethical bodies and regulatory bodies reciprocated by introducing friendlier mechanisms of granting approvals aimed to provide rigorous but rapid review. New Guidelines and modifications in existing guidelines were introduced to facilitate research in COVID-19 [3, 4]. All stakeholders contributed to facilitate. Research studies based on inadequate existing evidence embarked inevitably due to lack of alternatives possibly due to the novel nature of disease. Adaptive study designs, interim analysis, and data monitoring boards provided scientific explanations to embrace this. In the competition of numbers and speed, quality and integrity was compromised in some cases. Some studies make their way to high impact factor journals and also affected other researches. Scientific mechanisms, again came to rescue and helped in identification of publications with questionable trustworthiness. These publications were retracted and further damage control was done. New evidence kept on emerging, directly affecting hopes and hypes. The whole process looked like trial and error. In all this it seemed that human side was missed. No significant efforts were seen to address the direct implications to the human research participants and general public, at large. Public engagement, education and attempts to gain their trust remained as a fraction of collective efforts. Further damage was done by influx of misinformation making its way to public, without any check. This situation poses a great threat as the key to control the current outbreak heavily relies on the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of public. In spite of this well established fact, community engagement remains neglected. While the rate of COVID-19 infections goes down, it is time to reflect how researchers and research institutes have prioritized their research initiatives. Seemingly the commitment of researchers towards the ultimate good of patients is reduced to game of numbers and impact factor. It has led the researchers to engage in questionable research practices recently. Duty to uphold responsible conduct of research is of utmost importance at the challenging time of global health emergencies. Resources should only be reserved for essential questions, rigorous methods and ethically sound initiatives undertaken with responsibility. This is only possible if researchers are assessed on the importance and impact of their research, while responding to needs of individuals and communities being studied, and not on the mere numbers. Research Institutes hold the responsibility to implement fair criteria of assessment of researchers. Funders and publishing bodies also need similar mechanisms in their decision making. Together we can contribute towards responsible conduct of research.

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