



Article Title

Can we contain the COVID-19 outbreak with the same measures as for SARS?

Citation

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Abstract

The severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak in 2003 resulted in more than 8000 cases and 800 deaths. SARS was eventually contained by means of syndromic surveillance, prompt isolation of patients, strict enforcement of quarantine of all contacts, and in some areas top-down enforcement of community quarantine. By interrupting all human-to-human transmission, SARS was effectively eradicated. By contrast, by Feb 28, 2020, within a matter of 2 months since the beginning of the outbreak of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), more than 82 000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 have been reported with more than 2800 deaths. Although there are striking similarities between SARS and COVID-19, the differences in the virus characteristics will ultimately determine whether the same measures for SARS will also be successful for COVID-19. COVID-19 differs from SARS in terms of infectious period, transmissibility, clinical severity, and extent of community spread. Even if traditional public health measures are not able to fully contain the outbreak of COVID-19, they will still be effective in reducing peak incidence and global deaths. Exportations to other countries need not result in rapid large-scale outbreaks, if countries have the political will to rapidly implement countermeasures.

Summary

Containment of COVID-19 should remain the focus at the moment. The short-term cost of containment will be far lower than the long-term cost of non-containment.

However, closures of institutions and public places, and restrictions in travel and trade, cannot be maintained indefinitely. Countries have to face the reality that individual-case containment might not be possible in the long run, and there might be the need to move from containment to mitigation, balancing the costs and benefits of public health measures. Even if our public health measures are not able to fully contain the spread of COVID-19 because of the virus characteristics, they will still be effective in delaying the onset of widespread community transmission, reducing

peak incidence and its impact on public services, and decreasing the overall attack rate. In addition, minimising the size of the outbreak or suppressing its peak can reduce global deaths by providing health systems with the opportunity to scale up and respond, and to slow down the global spread until effective vaccines become available.