Letter to the Editor

Compliance of hand hygiene can play a pivotal role in limiting the spread of COVID-19 through public transportation

To the Editor,

The current pandemic of COVID-19 caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) has put millions of people at risk to a public health threat in a rapidly increasing number of countries [1]. Due to its incessant spread throughout the world, effective strategies should be made that can be used on a long-term basis for different situations and susceptible groups of people during this pandemic. The basic mode of transport for most of the people is public transportation. As the vehicles are confined spaces, they can be source of transmission of this disease through human-to-human transmission. Subsequently, many groups of cases have been reported by several countries in the public transportation facilities caused by respiratory viruses including the SARS-CoV-2. SARS-CoV-2 becomes highly infectious in the confined setting of public transport. Consequently, to limit the spread of this virus, effective measures such as environmental and personal hygiene that also includes hand hygiene.

Hand hygiene is an established practice to curb the spread of an infectious disease. The COVID-19 pandemic has created more awareness about the importance of hand hygiene worldwide. The notion of decreasing the transmission of disease by proper hand cleansing has been supported by the evidence that it decreases the likelihood of disease transmission by 24%–31%. However, to prevent the transmission of the virus, it is recommended by the CDC to do frequent hand washing with water and soap for a duration of 20 seconds. Furthermore, if the soap and water are not available, a hand sanitizer can be used that should have at least 60% of alcohol. Frequent hand washing can predispose the person to hand dermatitis if moisturizer is not applied subsequently. During the outbreak of COVID-19 in China, a majority (66.1%) health care workers washed their hands more than 10 times a day, whereas only one third (22.1%) used a moisturizer afterwards [2].

Public transport will remain an essential service during the pandemic. While most people stay at home, cities should prioritize those most in need of affordable and safe transportation, including people with disabilities, primary care, and other essential workers. Governments must work with public transport operators (both formal and informal) to monitor and regulate public transport to ensure high standards of cleanliness and good hygiene. Operators must ensure that all interior surfaces, including posts, handrails, seats, steering wheel, and all parts that people touch are thoroughly cleaned after every ride. There must be physical distance between users, which can be achieved by imposing restrictions on the number of travelers. Operators should promote cashless payments for tickets or suspend fares temporarily [3]. Cycling and walking should be encouraged as an alternative to public transportation, whenever possible, to reduce the risk of spreading the virus and improve overall health. Cities can prioritize pedestrians and bicyclists on certain roads, making them safer to use. Moreover, innovative traceability of passenger contacts on public transport via technology should be encouraged, as applications such as “Trace Together” in Singapore maintain archives of all travel records by passengers [4].

In a recent study conducted by Bonful et al. [5], to determine the status of compliance to hand hygiene in stations of public transport facilities using the WHO hand hygiene assessment scale in Ghana reported that in around 87% of the stations the hand washing facilities were rarely used. Around 82% of the stations had not provided any printed guidance in the form of posters to educate people on appropriate hand hygiene. This study shows that the compliance to hand washing is inadequate to limit the spread of COVID-19. It is basic and cost effective that can make public transport a much safer and cheap mode of transport for major population who can only resort to this option. Checking the compliance to hand washing is also not very expensive so developing countries can also use this modality to curb the spread of COVID-19. It is important to provide safe mobility today and start planning for sustainable mobility tomorrow, learning from the experiences gained from the pandemic, including how teleworking can replace daily commuting and how distribution of essential services across cities can facilitate access.

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