Mental health response to COVID-19 outbreak in China

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The 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) transmission (1) has now widely and rapidly spread around the world. On Mar 11, 2020, WHO announced that COVID-19 is a pandemic (2). The rapid transmission and potential mortality risk of the COVID-19 infection might increase the risk of mental health problems among healthy individuals in the public and worsen preexisting psychiatric problems in the psychiatric patients, albeit the data are still being gathered. A constellation of difficult feelings and psychological distress, including panic, worries and depression could be triggered by the fear of possible infection, being quarantined at hospitals and home, social isolation, and even the shortage of protective gears.

To date, there are a number of ongoing mental health surveys associated with the COVID-19 outbreak being conducted in different vulnerable populations which include the infected patients, medical staff, students, and the general population. Liu et al. firstly reported a multicenter survey conducted in 1563 medical staff members and found that the prevalence of depression and anxiety was 51% and 45%, respectively (3). So far, the data on the mental health repercussion of the COVID-19 pandemic in the outpatient populations have not been available. Thus, we conducted a questionnaire survey, from Feb 25 to Mar 9, 2020, in the outpatients who sought help in the Departments of Psychiatry, Neurology and Sleep Medicine in West China Hospital, Sichuan University (Chengdu, China). A self-reported questionnaire was completed by all the consented outpatients via the WeChat-based survey program “Questionnaire Star”. A total of 2065 out of 3441 patients completed the survey, including 589 new patients and 1476 existing patients. The prevalence rates of mental
health problems related to the COVID-19 outbreak, including anxiety (defined as a total score of $\geq 5$ on the Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7), depression (defined as a total score of $\geq 5$ on the Patient Health Questionnaire-9), and insomnia (defined as a total score of $\geq 8$ on the Insomnia Severity Index), were 25.5%, 16.9% and 26.2% respectively. Furthermore, 20.9% of the patients (n = 300) with pre-existing psychiatric disorders (n = 1434) reported a deterioration of their mental health condition related to the pandemic. In particular, the transport restriction, isolation at home, and fear of cross-infection in hospital have inevitably become the major concerns and barriers to treatment for these patients during the outbreak. Among the new patients, our survey showed that 24.5% of them including those with anxiety (n = 46), depression (n = 37), insomnia (n = 79), and psychosis (n = 21) could not get timely diagnosis and treatment. Similarly, 22.0% of the existing patients with diagnosed mental disorders including depression, bipolar disorders and schizophrenia (n = 315) could not get their routine psychiatric care due to the suspended hospital visits. Consequently, 18.1% of the patients (n = 259) had to self-reduce the dosage and 17.2% of the patients (n = 247) stopped their medication because they could not gain the access to their prescriptions during the outbreak. As the lifetime prevalence of mental disorders is 16.6% in adults in China (4), millions of psychiatric patients might potentially face the barriers to help seeking for timely management of their mental health condition. The long-term repercussion of the viral pandemic on the management of psychiatric patients warrants further investigation. Nonetheless, our data reiterated the importance of implementing appropriate mental health measures in
the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, there have been ongoing measures and concerted efforts in China that emphasized the importance of dealing with the potential, concurrent mental health crisis. On January 26, 2020, the National Health Commission has released the notification of principles for emergency psychological crisis intervention for the COVID-19 pandemic (5). The mental health hotlines were quickly established across China and provided the public with counseling and psychological services. The telephone and internet have been widely used to deliver the online mental health services, and the social media (e.g. WeChat, Weibo) has provided the platform to share strategies, guidelines and education programmes for managing potential mental distress. In addition, a series of self-help handbooks for psychological care associated with COVID-19 have been swiftly published by the Association for Mental Health, medical institutions and universities.

Furthermore, a number of hospitals in China have initiated the telemedicine services for patients in need during the outbreak of COVID-19. On the 26th of January 2020, West China Hospital of Sichuan University, as one of the leading hospitals in China, rapidly opened a free online outpatient service, in which more than one hundred medical doctors across different specialties were involved. This online outpatient service was mainly catered to provide prescriptions to the existing patients and to offer consultation to the new patients. Our hospital collaborated with the courier companies (e.g. S.F. Express) to deliver medicine to patient’s home for free. To date, thousands of patients have received healthcare provided by this online
outpatient service. Interestingly, there were only 7.4% of the patients with mental disorders (n = 136) in our survey who have sought online help for medical care. Thus, there is a need for promoting online mental health services across China to manage mental problems during the pandemic.

The long-term outcomes of the mental health interventions in both communities and hospital settings would need further evaluation in order to determine on how we could ameliorate the negative impact of viral outbreaks in the general public, especially among those vulnerable patients with mental problems.

References


http://www.nhc.gov.cn/jkj/s3577/202001/6ade08b966594253b2b791be5c3b9467.shtml (accessed Jan 26, 2020)