EDITORIAL

Stigma- The other Pandemic

The stigma of a disease is a type of social stigma, a strong negative feeling towards a person with a particular illness relating to their moral status in society. Infectious diseases and even some non-communicable diseases have been stigmatized throughout history. The disease stigma has an astonishingly long history, one that traverses back to the medieval period's panic over leprosy. The two other good examples of disease stigma are the 1892 outbreaks of typhus fever and cholera in the United States. While it was essential to take infectious disease control seriously, the measures adopted for disease control stigmatized an entire group of immigrants rather than pursuing control measures based on sound scientific principles. However, the most prominent disease stigma in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has probably been the prejudice against people with HIV/AIDS.

In Kashmir, the context presence of the leper colony is an archaic reminder of such stigma. With emerging epidemics like Coronavirus in the era of economic globalization, shame and stigma will lead to wider spread and devastating consequences. Individuals with or at risk for stigmatized diseases may avoid seeking health care to avoid being stigmatized.[2]

The kind of public reaction around people suspected of or infected with Coronavirus makes one understand why and how Leprosy and Tuberculosis had the associated stigma and how it took ages to remove that and how that stigma became a barrier to treatment. It has nothing to do with ages; dark ages seem to be a misnomer. It was a darkness hidden in all of us that created stigma and shame, then it is the same streak of darkness again, which is creating stigma and shame, thus impeding treatment. The stigmatization might have served the purpose of a survivor in earliest human history by decreasing spread in case of communicable diseases but its continuation has led to social stigma and ta\boos around these illnesses.[1] This despite, available treatment, leads to non-treatments mortality, morbidity, and further spreading.

There is a need to do physical isolation quarantine but coupled with emotions of love, empathy, longing, and prayers for the wellbeing of infected and suspected. It will, in turn, decrease the stigma, shame, and exclusion, while making people self-regulate and cooperate in a way that will help us defeat the epidemic. Those who volunteer to self-isolate are doing it for their families, friends, and the elderly for all of us. They are all heroes, not villains.

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