

# COVID-19 Quarantine: A Key Part of Prevention in Nepal

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## ABSTRACT

As the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak continues to evolve, globally, many countries have introduced preventive measures to reduce human-to-human transmission in areas where the virus that causes COVID-19 is already circulating in the population. Public health measures include quarantine, which involves the restriction of the movement of ill people from the rest of the population. With the rapid increase in the number of COVID-19 positive cases, the Government of Nepal has also introduced quarantine for the COVID-19 positive cases as well as the returning migrant workers and their accompanying family members. However, concerns over quarantine facilities in border areas of Nepal have been raised by the healthcare professionals quoting the facilities as risky. Hence, the quarantine facility needs to have minimum standards so that the infection is not spread further as well as improving the better health of those in quarantine rather than deteriorating their situation. The essentials such as adequate food, water, and hygiene provisions should be made available to the patients during the quarantine period and their health should be monitored. Other preventive measures such as social distancing and hand hygiene should be maintained within the quarantine facility.

Keywords: Covid-19, Quarantine Management, Nepalese Scenarios

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## BACKGROUND

The outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was declared an International Public Health Emergency on 30 January 2020.<sup>1</sup> As the outbreak continues to evolve, globally, data as of 5th June 2020, there were 6,515,796 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 387,298 deaths.<sup>2</sup> Hence, many countries have introduced preventive measures to reduce human-to-human transmission in areas where the virus that causes COVID-19 is already circulating in the population.<sup>3</sup> Public health measures include quarantine, which involves the restriction of movement of people. Quarantine comes from the Italian word for forty days, referring to isolating ill people for this period. This isolation from the rest of the population, of either ill people and/or healthy persons who may have been exposed to the virus, has the objective of monitoring their symptoms and ensuring early detection of new cases.<sup>3</sup> There is additional evidence that early tracing of contacts of infected people who are under quarantine may considerably reduce the disease transmission<sup>4</sup>. The WHO (World Health Organization) recommends that contacts of patients with laboratory-confirmed COVID-19 be quarantined for 14 days from the last time they were exposed to the patient.<sup>3</sup>

## QUARANTINE IN NEPAL

The Ministry of Health and Population has announced the occurrence of 2036 confirmed cases and 8 deaths from COVID-19 as of 2nd June 2020 from 61 districts of Nepal.<sup>5</sup> There has been sharp increase of cases in Nepal. The Government of Nepal has been putting in place a series of measures to address the situation, but more needs to be done.<sup>6</sup> One measure includes placing (a) returning migrant workers and their accompanying family members in quarantine centers and (b) those testing positive in border municipalities and districts to prevent transmission to other municipalities.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, suboptimal infection control protocols in some overcrowded quarantine and isolation centers is a matter of concern. Recently many migrant workers have returned in large numbers from India. Though after the lockdown thousands of them have been stopped on the other side of the border, those who made it to Nepal have been placed in quarantine facilities where they are living in close proximity to each other and sharing goods such as cigarettes and chewing tobacco and even sharing beds in some instances.<sup>7</sup> The government has not yet implemented quarantine, isolation and social distancing properly, nor has it arranged for proper quarantine facilities in various districts outside the Valley.<sup>7</sup>

## RISKS OF POOR QUARANTINE FACILITIES

The WHO document on the quarantine of individuals for the containment of COVID-19 clearly mentions that people who are quarantined need to be provided with health care, financial, social and psychosocial support and basic needs including food, water and other essentials. These needs should be prioritized if the population who are quarantined include vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, disabled people, women and children and elderly<sup>3</sup>. There should also be a provision for maintaining minimum Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures such as performing hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene.<sup>8</sup> In line with these guidelines, the Government has also developed strategies for quarantine management for international travelers who have entered Nepal either by air or over land. Schools, campuses, hotels, hostels and other facilities across the country are chosen and these travelers are kept in quarantine for minimum 14 days. There is also a mechanism for monitoring the quarantine including checking the facility standards and collecting feedback from people who stayed at these facilities.<sup>8</sup>

However, concerns over quarantine facilities in border areas of Nepal have been raised by the healthcare professionals quoting the facilities as risky. There are also concerns over poor management of quarantine facilities and experts have warned that quarantine facilities themselves can become outbreak hotspots.<sup>7</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTING QUARANTINE

The WHO (2020) recommends that if a decision to implement quarantine is taken, the authorities should ensure that:

- the quarantine setting is appropriate, and that adequate food, water, and hygiene provisions can be made for the quarantine period;
- minimum IPC measures can be implemented; and
- minimum requirements for monitoring the health of quarantined persons can be met during the quarantine period.

The implementation of quarantine implies the use or creation of appropriate facilities in which a person or persons are physically separated from the community while being cared for.<sup>3</sup> Appropriate quarantine arrangements measure that Nepal can adapt but not limited to are as follows:

- Those who are in quarantine must be placed in adequately ventilated, spacious single rooms with hand hygiene and toilet facilities. If single rooms are not available, beds should be placed at least 1 metre apart.
- Suitable environmental infection controls must be used, such as ensuring adequate air ventilation, air filtration systems, and waste-management protocols.
- Social distance must be maintained (that is, distance of at least 1 metre) between all persons who are quarantined.
- Accommodation must provide an appropriate level of comfort, including: – provision of food, water, and hygiene facilities;
- Appropriate medical treatment for existing conditions should be made available;
- Psychosocial support must be available.
- Perform hand hygiene frequently, particularly after contact with respiratory secretions, before eating, and after using the toilet.
- Ensure that all persons in quarantine are practicing respiratory hygiene and are aware of the importance of covering their nose and mouth with a bent elbow or paper tissue when coughing or sneezing and then immediately disposing of the tissue in a wastebasket with a lid and then performing hand hygiene.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces – such as bedside tables, bed frames and other bedroom furniture and bathroom and toilet surfaces – daily with regular household disinfectant containing a diluted bleach solution.
- The waste disposal should be in a sanitary landfill and not in an unmonitored open area.

Source: adapted from WHO, 2020.<sup>3</sup>

## THE WAY FORWARD

Just having isolating people in quarantine is not enough to prevent COVID-19 from spreading. The quarantine facility needs to have minimum standards so that the infection is not spread further as well

as improving the better health of those in quarantine rather than deteriorating their situation. The essentials such as adequate food, water, and hygiene provisions should be made available to the patients during the quarantine period and their health should be monitored. Other preventive measures such as social distancing and hand hygiene should be maintained within the quarantine facility.

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