

Dramatic Decline in Cases of Covid-19 in Pakistan: Protective Effects of Wudoo (Ablution: Compulsory Washing of Hands, Arms, Face and Feet)

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From the beginning of August 2020, a remarkable decline in the number of Covid-19 patients in Pakistan was noticed in Pakistan. This phenomenon is in sharp contrast to the epidemiology predictions models by the best institutions of the world for Pakistan. The worst forecast based on a predicted model by Imperial College London produced a scenario of 30,000 deaths a day in early August in Pakistan which would have gone to 80,000 deaths per day in the middle of August. The spread of Covid-19 was expected to follow the same pattern as it was in the West. However, the disease behavior of Covid-19 in Pakistan does not match with countries of similar population and climate. So far, there are 6,000 deaths, with 278,000 recorded cases of infection. While in Brazil (a country with same size of Population as Pakistan) more than 92,000 people have died of Covid-19 and reported case were 2.7 million. In neighboring India on August 5, 2020 reported cases of Corona virus infection were 19,08,254 with 39,820 deaths while infection rate is still on rise.

This decline of Covid-19 in Pakistan and a sharp contrast to the West and even its neighbors have surprised the world. It is difficult even for health authorities to comprehend an unprecedented disease control in country with limited resources from the same situation, where best health systems in the world with almost limitless resources failed in the West. Anna Vassall, a professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said, "The decline in Pakistan is promising but we are not yet certain as to the cause, nor how long it will last. The spread of COVID-19 is driven by social behavior and it is difficult to measure how that has changed"

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So, question remains, why disease behavior in Pakistan is different from the West. Is it Lockdown (including smart lockdowns) and social distancing only? Is its effective tracing of patient's contacts, testing and isolating affected families? Is it the hand hygiene? Is it due to mass media campaign and more awareness of people? Is it the changed social behaviors of Pakistanis who have flattened the disease curve? Is it the immunity or use of the BCG vaccine in this region? All these are components of effective, comprehensive strategies employed all over the world to contain the virus. The question is: did we use these interventions more effectively than even the societies with small populations, better education, more resources and awareness?

The rate of infection and mortality is much higher in the West and in neighboring India than Pakistan where these interventions were used. Without questioning the efficacy, role and effectiveness of these preventive measures, there is one unnoticed ritual in Pakistan which might have played a greater role in containing the disease.

The Wudoo (Ablution) i.e. compulsory washing of hands up to elbows, face (including mouth and nose) and feet five times a day has made this difference and contributed in control of epidemic in Pakistan. Leave the West, what is different from India in Pakistan for this epidemic. We are inhabitants of the same climate; both countries have similar demographics, almost same economics and health system, same immunity and use of BCG yet a sharp contrast in the behavior of Covid-19.WHO has promoted the Hand Hygiene at individual level as the main strategy to stay safe from the infection! Pakistan is an overwhelming Muslim country. As Muslims we are doing wudoo five times a day before offering prayers. We (Muslims) wash hands before and after eating (as Sunnah even if using spoons and forks).

It may be difficult for number of people to comprehend and accept it but as a professor of medicine and a person who is heading the team which diagnosed and managed the first case and still actively

engaged with Covid-19 in AJK, it is my considered opinion that our rituals as Muslims have played a significant role in shaping the limited spread and behavior of this disease in Pakistan.