

Wise investment is needed for maximising the benefits in Covid times

“We should use our unique human intelligence to solve challenges we face, and never give up or tell ourselves there’s no hope. If we have a positive goal and we’re well-motivated to seek the well-being of others, no matter how difficult it is to achieve, we can remain determined.” – His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet

Dear Editor,

Gupta *et al.*^[1] write a Commentary on Covid appropriate behaviour in India in May 2021 issue of the Journal. They chronicle various stages of behaviour changes in India during *first wave* of the pandemic and its various dimensions in different aspects of our daily routine. This article is a comprehensive account of several important changes that mark the beginning of the scourge in 2020.

The article has a heading, ‘Covid-19 appropriate behaviour in India’ and under it there is a subheading, ‘Understand the importance of technology’. Under the subheading, the authors write that entire education system went online, gradually teachers and students became adapted to the system and quality started matching with classroom teaching. And then go on, ‘These experiments opened up many ideas for future progression and innovations’. What we confer by the paragraph is that as transmission risk of social meeting and gathering made it dangerous to conduct physical classrooms, initially the teaching was virtual with several challenges therein but later on the situation improved.

Notwithstanding that assertion, what we observe is that to conduct virtual Covid meeting in a teaching hospital is fraught with technological hardships which demand fixing. At several critical moments of conversation live stream goes off, voice gets muffled, video goes in a buffering mode, bandwidth becomes an issue and repetition makes conversation difficult. And this is the affair at the city centres of our Metropolitan cities having state-of-the-art technology. That blur provides us a window to imagine what is happening in distant villages where more often than not telecom-service providers don’t find it beneficial to provide broadband services as average revenue generated per user is less, purchasing power of an average farmer lags behind an average citizen by a wide margin and distance between the ruler and the ruled make it an obstacle to share one’s grievances freely.^[2] Rahul De and colleagues write under a heading 2.5

‘Internet access and digital divide’ that those on the wrong side of the digital divide are completely left out.^[3]

Under these circumstances, when a student finds that to access her online classes is a difficult task, it should bring us no surprise. Chasm of this digital divide gets highlighted on every passing day the pandemic runs. Those who *have* the bandwidth, find it easier to access their classes and *have nots* don’t. Now our government^[4] as well as international bodies^[5] are realizing that differential access is impeding the growth of the underdog, the marginalized, the poor and the lower stratum which needs to be rectified. Joshi and colleagues discover that women, especially illiterate/poorly literates ones, find it more challenging to cross the access barrier to go online.^[6]

Under another heading, ‘Work–life balance’, the authors write that this (work from home) strategy made it clear that most of the professional jobs have a certain amount of work that can be done remotely. They go on to state, ‘In this way people learnt the work life balance in a more applied way’. What we infer is that there was no major change in job market and all is well. Whereas the reality is that there are major job losses in the market that are unprecedented in history.

This pandemic brought negative growth of the economy – due to lockdown – for the first time in independent India. When factories are shut, production wheels are brought to a screeching halt, lockdown makes it difficult for manual and blue-collared workers to reach manufacturing sites; result is that the poor bore the maximum brunt of the pandemic.^[7] While white-collar workers can fulfil much demands of their jobs from home, employees of gig economy suffered huge losses – and continue to be.

Therefore, what emerges is that there may be a few benefits for which time is there for investment but at present a big social upheaval is going on in economics, job market, education sector along with healthcare scenario. While top echelons of the society are able to reap the dividends of the crisis because of easy access to bandwidth and work-from-home facility; we need to appreciate also that a large part of society is not. As all of us are together in the boat, we need to reach out on the other side of divide and assure and provide every possible help, benefit, support and cooperation – lest history may not judge us fairly.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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We accessed all the webpages at the time of submission of this manuscript.

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Received: 29-06-2021

Revised: 30-09-2021

Accepted: 01-10-2021

Published: 30-08-2022

Access this article online

Quick Response Code:



Website:

www.jfmpc.com

DOI:

10.4103/jfmpc.jfmpc_1285_21

How to cite this article: Gupta H, Kumar S, Kumar A, Nigam N. Wise investment is needed for maximising the benefits in Covid times. *J Family Med Prim Care* 2022;11:4890-1.

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