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Seven Principles of Quarantine for the COVID-19 Pandemic



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The New York Times introduced the word ‘naeronambul’ while reporting the results of the by-election on April 7, 2021, in Korea. The New York Times translated ‘naeronambul’ as follows: “If they do it, it’s a romance; if others do it, they call it an extramarital affair.”¹

Of course, ‘naeronambul’ quarantine can also exist. However, the word “jeongchi-bangyeok” appears in the Korean media instead. “Jeongchi-bangyeok” is used to mean abusing quarantine for political purposes.

The government can use a variety of coercive measures to cope with the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. These include closure of schools and businesses, bans on gatherings, curfews, stay-at-home orders, quarantine for travelers, travel restrictions, and sanitary cordons.²

The Moon Jae-in administration has been proud of its achievements, calling Korea’s quarantine the K-quarantine. Of course, there are achievements. However, there is also criticism that it is “jeongchi-bangyeok.”

Therefore, it is very important to check whether the principles of quarantine are being observed in situations where the end of the pandemic is unknown. Below, 7 principles of quarantine for the COVID-19 pandemic are listed and related controversial events in Korea are reviewed.

First, quarantine must be based on the law. If there is no legal basis, the government cannot limit the basic rights of its people. Furthermore, even if there is a legal basis, it is difficult to regard it as a proper quarantine if any principle presented below is ignored.

Second, quarantine must be based on science. On March 19, 2021, the commissioner of Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, Jeong Eun Kyeong expressed the view that the AstraZeneca and Pfizer vaccine had no significant difference in efficacy or safety.³ However, it is questionable whether this judgment is based on science. Without a scientific basis, quarantine leads to wrong policies.

Third, quarantine must adhere to the principle of proportion. At rush hour, the subway in Seoul is crowded with many people. Even though they are wearing masks, many people face each other closely every day in a limited space where the air does not circulate well.

While allowing such a great risk of infection, the government has thoroughly blocked anti-government rallies conducted outdoors wearing masks. This violates the principle of proportion.

Fourth, quarantine must comply with the least infringement principle. Although the government allows eating without a mask in indoor restaurants, people are forced to wear a mask even when walking alone outdoors. This violates the least infringement principle.

Fifth, quarantine must comply with the principle of non-discrimination. President Moon Jae-in recently called four former aides to the presidential office compound and had dinner with alcohol. According to the quarantine regulations, it is illegal if there are 5 or more people in a private meeting. However, the government announced that the President's dinner was not a private meeting, so it was not a violation of the quarantine regulations. This is an example of 'naeronambul.'

According to the quarantine regulations, business meetings are classified as public meetings even in private companies. The government considers business people's dinner as a private meeting and the president's personal dinner as a public meeting. This interpretation violates the principle of non-discrimination.

Sixth, other official policies should not undermine quarantine measures. On December 17, 2020, Prime Minister Jeong Sye-gyun said, "It is very regrettable because there are many meetings of young people at the end of the year."

However, since August 14, the government has provided discount coupons worth about 170 billion won in eight fields, including dining out, movies, performances, tourism, and lodging, to save the economy. In addition, the government allowed the campaign to gather hundreds of people in the by-election on April 7, 2020. This, too, was undermining the quarantine measures.

Seventh, quarantine must protect vulnerable individuals. In the fall of 2020, more than 1,200 people were infected with COVID-19 at the Dongbu Detention Center in southeastern Seoul. According to the inmates' claim, before the outbreak, the Ministry of Justice did not properly provide masks to inmates, and even banned inmates from buying masks at their own expense.⁴ Such measures constitute serious human rights violations.

On February 14, 2020, President Moon Jae-in said that the COVID-19 pandemic would soon end.⁵ However, it is not yet known when the pandemic will end. The Moon administration was not active in purchasing vaccines in advance. As a result, as of April 19, 2021, Korea's vaccination rate was ranked 35th of the 37 OECD member countries.

If pharmaceutical interventions are delayed while the pandemic continues, the government will inevitably rely on non-pharmaceutical interventions, which are compulsory measures. This means that the controversy over the infringement of basic rights can continue. Now, the government must adhere to the principles of quarantine for the COVID-19 pandemic and achieve balance between public health and basic rights of the individual.

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