

**Key messages:**

- Being adult with low socioeconomic level and not being health worker were determinants of social stigma.
- Psychological assistance for COVID-19 patients is crucial to prevent social stigma repercussion during this outbreak.

### Social stigma among COVID-19 patients after quarantine in Sousse, Tunisia

Imene Mlouki

*I Mlouki<sup>1</sup>, N Zammit<sup>1,2,3</sup>, R Ghammem<sup>1,2,3</sup>, S Ben Fredj<sup>1,2,3</sup>, R Bannour<sup>1</sup>, A El Echi<sup>1</sup>, C Bennasrallah<sup>1</sup>, J Maatoug<sup>1,2,3</sup>, H Ghannem<sup>1,2,3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Department of Epidemiology, University Hospital Farhat Hached, Sousse, Tunisia

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of Medicine of Sousse, University of Sousse, Sousse, Tunisia

<sup>3</sup>Laboratory of Research LR19SP03, Sousse, Tunisia

Contact: imenemlouki91@gmail.com

#### Background:

Assessing stigma related to COVID-19 is crucial to better understand the pandemic's impacts and establish effective stigma-reducing interventions. The aim of this study was to screen for stigma and evaluate its associated factors among adults with COVID-19 living in the governorate of Sousse (Tunisia).

#### Methods:

A cross sectional study was conducted among a representative sample of patients with COVID-19 between the 6th of November and the 12th of December 2020 in the governorate of Sousse. The 12-item HIV stigma scale was translated in Arabic and then adapted to the Tunisian context. Three pre-trained medical doctors administrated the pre-tested Arabic questionnaire to each participant by phone calls. Higher scores reflect a higher level of perceived Covid-19-related stigma.

#### Results:

Responses of 346 participants with COVID-19 infection were obtained. The majority of participants were females (60.4%) with a median age of 40 years (interquartile range, 30 to 54.5 years). Among them, 12.7% were health professionals and 12.5% had at least secondary educational level. Because of COVID-19 illness, 17.1% reported financial deterioration. We found mean scores of  $14.6 \pm 4.07$ ,  $6.8 \pm 2.39$  and  $6.2 \pm 1.95$  for social stigma, disclosure concerns and negative self-image dimensions respectively. Social stigma score was significantly higher among adults ( $14.9 \pm 3.9$  versus  $13.05 \pm 4.4$  among elderly;  $p = 0.01$ ) and people with low socioeconomic level ( $15.8 \pm 4.8$  versus  $14.3 \pm 3.8$ ;  $p = 0.02$ ). Lower scores of social stigma were found among health caregivers ( $13.3 \pm 2.6$  versus  $14.8 \pm 4.2$ ;  $p = 0.002$ ). Those factors remained as predictors of social stigma after linear regression analysis.

#### Conclusions:

Screening for stigma is required in order to identify the most vulnerable patients and could prevent among them social repercussions. Psychological assistance of patients with social stigma would help them to overcome this crisis.