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WRITE FOR TOI BLOGS

Given new data we must downgrade the severity of this pandemic

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[Sanjeev Sabhlok](#) in [Seeing the Invisible](#) | [Economy](#), [India](#), [politics](#) | TOI

COVID-19 data on Worldometers is not reliable. There are issues with the reported cases (an 11 November 2020 Portuguese court judgement highlighted the flaws of PCR tests) and there are serious issues with the way COVID-19 deaths are reported.

Statisticians will need to thoroughly cross-check this data. One way to do so is to look for the signal of the pandemic in total annual deaths. Around 60 million people die globally each year. Let's say that in early 2021 we find that 62 million died in 2020: then we could say that the pandemic killed 2 million people.

Initially, no one knew about the magnitude of the risk posed by this virus but by mid-April 2020 anyone with rudimentary arithmetic skills would have known that the models had exaggerated their projections. I therefore downgraded my estimates on [30 May 2020](#) and wrote: "this virus is ... definitely not like the Spanish flu in its lethality. It is better compared with the Asian flu of 1957-58 or the Hong Kong flu of 1968-1970, both of which were around 20 times less lethal than the Spanish flu".

In the meanwhile, India's extraordinarily low death rate from COVID-19 was a mystery, so on [27 July 2020](#), I suggested that this could be because of cross-reactivity. Trained immunity from BCG vaccines is also a possible factor and also the use of HCQ as a prophylactic.

But as we are getting closer to the end of 2020, we can start estimating the annual deaths of nations and try to work out the real impact of this virus.

Sweden's official agency recently updated its deaths data till 13 November 2020, using which I have estimated that Sweden will likely report around 94,600 annual deaths in 2020. This can be compared with 92,185 deaths in 2018 (I'm excluding 2019 which had a very mild flu season across Europe – it is therefore not a typical year). This shows Sweden will have had just 2,400 additional deaths in 2020, an astonishingly small number after the song, dance and drama of 2020.

Sweden has had 6,340 reported COVID deaths to date. With only around 2,400 additional overall (estimated) deaths, where did almost 4,000 "COVID" deaths go? Some them might have been misclassified due to data deficiencies but most would be those who would have died during 2020 of some other cause. That is why we typically see a sharp drop in deaths after the peak of a pandemic (for instance – 224 fewer Swedes died in September 2020 compared with September 2018 because many elderly Swedes died in March and April, instead).

This real (but currently an estimated) impact of only 2,400 additional deaths by COVID in Sweden can be compared with the hysterical estimates of 10 May 2020 when Dagens Nyheter (a Swedish newspaper) reported about a study which said: "Our model predicts that ... at least 96,000 deaths would occur by 1 July without mitigation".

There is obviously a huge difference between 100,000 additional annual deaths (double Sweden's annual deaths) and only 2,400 or 2.6% additional annual deaths. This data – which we can now start calculating for all nations – gives us a sense of the true magnitude of the severity of this pandemic.

Based on this analysis, we can safely conclude that this pandemic's lethality is far less than was imagined even a few months ago. Initial data from European nations and the USA is also suggesting a small likely net increase in annual deaths. While we might we have 1.5 million reported COVID deaths by end-2020, the actual increase in global annual deaths is likely to be much smaller (noting also that many of the final annual deaths would be those caused by the lockdowns).

India's death rates are already quite small, with just over 5 days of additional annual deaths attributed to COVID to date (i.e. 1.4% of likely additional annual deaths) but I expect the true net increase in annual deaths to be smaller.

The need to significantly downgrade the pandemic based on this analysis is particularly urgent since most of the world is still hysterical. For instance, Dr Brett Sutton, Victorian Chief Health Officer said on 12 July 2020 that this pandemic is the "greatest public health challenge since the Spanish flu". On 3 November 2020, he tweeted: "Why is getting to very low/no cases and keeping them there so important? If you don't crush this virus, it could crush you". This hysteria was behind the world's most severe lockdowns and curfews imposed in Melbourne for months on end: I've gone through hell over the past year, with significant health effects.

Australia's situation has been so bad that I had to resign on 9 September 2020 from my job as an economist in the Victorian Government to protest the Police State created by atrocities on citizens in the name of public health. My resignation was reported in Australian and UK newspapers. In my TV and media interviews, I outlined the age-based risk-management approach (without any lockdowns, of course) that I have advocated since [6 March 2020](#).

I followed up my resignation with a book: *The Great Hysteria and The Broken State*. But that didn't help: till today, Australia's governments have not changed their policy and remain as hysterical as before. On 13 November 2020, I lodged a 68,000-word complaint with the International Criminal Court against the ongoing atrocities being committed by Australia's governments against their citizens.

They are committing atrocities not just against their own citizens. Indian students who took loans to study in Australia have written to me about the inhumane treatment they are receiving from the Australian Government. In many cases families have been separated for nine months – and there is no end in sight. One lady wrote to me: "I just came to my country [India] for only 23 days. Now stuck here for 9 months. I separated from my husband whom I never separated the last 10 years. I am dying every day." There are also instances, reportedly, where mother and child have been separated.

This mayhem and carnage – caused by border closures, lockdowns and curfews – can barely be imagined. And it has not ended. There is severe madness in the air. Even India remains half-hysterical as I gather from my conversations with people over the phone.

The world must bring this panic to an end by rationally examining the data which is telling us that this pandemic is just a little bit worse than the bad flu. We'll get to know more by February 2021 but even now there is enough information to immediately de-escalate and stop the panic.

And we need to return to full normalcy by adopting appropriate age-based risk management approaches that I've outlined repeatedly.

DISCLAIMER : Views expressed above are the author's own.

BLOG

Seeing the Invisible

The blog is named after *Seeing the Invisible*, the title book on economics that Sanjeev has written. Economics involves the study of invisible incentives and motivations. Self-seeking ministers and bureaucrats often work invisibly and insidiously against the public interest. This is more so in socialist countries where governments undertake a number of unnecessary functions. On the other hand, self-seeking businesses – through their competition for our custom – often end up fostering the public interest. The blog straddles a range of autobiographical, governance and policy issues, including the experience of joining and working within the IAS, letting go of the IAS and learning new things, and attempting to build a liberal party for India.

AUTHOR



Sanjeev Sabhlok

The blog is named after *Seeing the Invisible*, the title of a book on economics for children that Sanjeev wrote in 2018. Economics involves the study of ince...

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