

Risk assessment of mass gathering to control COVID-19 outbreak: Viewpoints

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Risk assessment of mass gathering to control COVID-19 outbreak: Viewpoints

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Abstract

With an increasing number of cases and global spread, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic on the 11th March by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Mass gatherings (MGs) are particularly concerning as they've the potential to spread the disease both within and between countries, with transmission occurring; (i) during the event, (ii) whilst travelling to and from it and (iii) when attendees return to their home communities. In Malaysia, a 'Tabligh' religious gathering was held in late February. Approximately 16,000 people attended, including 1,500 foreigners from over 20 countries, at Seri Petaling Mosque near to Kuala Lumpur. This gathering was linked to a surge in cases in Malaysia and across Singapore, Indonesia, India, Brunei, Cambodia, and Thailand. It remains Malaysia's largest COVID-19 cluster and as of 13th April was responsible for 38% of cases and 18 deaths in the country. It is important to risk assess MGs consistently with the COVID-19 risk assessment tool. To ensure the acceptability and success of MG cancellation decisions they should be: (1) Implemented early to reduce event travel; (2) Clearly communicated so that attendees understand why such decisions were taken including reinforcing good hygiene practices & (3) Make use of alternative arrangements such as postponement or technologies to hold the event remotely if safe to do so.

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Original Manuscript

Risk assessment of mass gathering to control COVID-19 outbreak

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With an increasing number of cases and global spread, coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was declared a pandemic on the 11th March by the World Health Organisation (WHO)¹. Mass gatherings (MGs) are particularly concerning as they've the potential to spread the disease both within and between countries, with transmission occurring; (i) during the event, (ii) whilst travelling to and from it and (iii) when attendees return to their home/other communities². As part of efforts to control the spread of the disease there has been a spate of cancellations of MGs in many countries, including the 2020 Olympics in Japan. Recognising the need for clear guidance on MGs and COVID-19, the WHO has updated MG guidance to include interim recommendations about COVID-19 and a risk assessment tool to methodically review key considerations, assess risks and risk reduction measures³.

The impact of MGs on COVID-19 spread has been seen in many countries. In Malaysia, a 'Tabligh' religious gathering was held in late February. Approximately 16,000 people attended, including 1,500 foreigners from over 20 countries, at Seri Petaling Mosque near Kuala Lumpur. This gathering was linked to a surge in cases in Malaysia. It remains Malaysia's largest COVID-19 cluster and as of 13th April was responsible for 38% of cases and 18 deaths in the country (Figure 1)⁴. Media reports have linked a Champion League football match in Milan in February between the Italian team Atalanta from Bergamo and the Spanish team Valencia, to

COVID-19 cases in Italy and Spain after over 40,000 Bergamo fans and 2,500 Valencia fans travelled to the game⁵. Indonesia has also faced issues with MGs going ahead despite the government requesting places of worship to halt religious gatherings until the outbreak is over. Over 180 attendees, including 78 foreigners, who made a pilgrimage to the Jammi Mosque in Taman Sari near Jakarta were placed in quarantine following a religious gathering after three attendees tested positive for the virus⁶. Yet a Christian religious MG of more than 1,000 people also went ahead despite official discouragement of MGs.

Religious festivals, such as Easter and Ramadan, with their special social and religious gatherings present a challenge for controlling the virus and there is an urgent need to review related MGs and ensure that control measures are followed. With worship outside of the home suspended, the Muslim Council of Britain has advised people to organise prayers with family members at home and to use online technologies⁷ and the Church of England has encouraged online streaming of services⁸. It is important that all types of MGs are risk assessed consistently with the WHO COVID-19 risk assessment tool. Similarly, acceptability by affected groups on decision of cancellation and stigmatisation by the public must be addressed proactively. For instance, the focus must be on the risk of all kinds of MGs, and not on religious gatherings as this could lead to stigmatisation and evoking negative sentiments that could disrupt harmony amongst the public. To ensure the acceptability and success of MG cancellation decisions they should be: (1) Implemented early to reduce event travel; (2) Clearly communicated so that attendees understand why such decisions were taken including reinforcing good hygiene practices (3) Make use of alternative arrangements such as postponement or technologies to hold the event remotely if safe to do so & (4) Proactive communication effort to avoid stigmatisation on any groups.

Figure 1 Timeline of 'Tabligh' cases compared to the total cases of positive COVID-19 in Malaysia

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Supplementary Files

Figures

Timeline of 'Tabligh' cases compared to the total cases of positive COVID-19 in Malaysia.

