

Correspondence

A dignified death: management of dead bodies during COVID-19

ABSTRACT

The emergence of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) has caused unprecedented challenge to manage the bodies of the dead. The disposal of the dead becomes a challenge as there is a shortage of coffins, and crematoriums are overwhelmed. A recent correspondence published in the *Journal of Public Health* highlighted the importance of performing the last rites in a time of COVID-19 pandemic. This paper argues that the bodies of those who have died because of COVID-19 should be treated with respect and dignity.

Keywords COVID-19, dead bodies, dignity, management, public health

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, which causes the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), has been characterized as highly contagious, with mass casualties.¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) regarded the new coronavirus variant first identified in India known as B.1.617 as a ‘variant of global concern’, with some preliminary studies showing that it spreads more easily than other variants.² A recent correspondence published in the *Journal of Public Health* highlighted the importance of performing the last rites in a time of COVID-19 pandemic.³ The said article was in response to a previously published article, which emphasized the importance of healing and palliative care in times of grief.⁴ Brazal³ emphasized the role of cybertechnologies in providing alternative spaces for the Last Rites for the dying. However, in India, scores of bodies are washing up on the banks of the Ganges, while crematoriums and graveyards are being overwhelmed without even performing the last rites.⁵ In Hinduism, cremation is traditionally the most important part of the funeral rites because Hindus believe the body must be destroyed to force the soul to separate from it.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed serious questions on how to manage the bodies of those who died from the deadly virus. The WHO has alerted governments that the number of deaths may overwhelm the local capacity to handle dead bodies properly. As per WHO directive, people who have died with COVID-19 can be buried or cremated. Family members

may view the body but they are not allowed to touch or kiss the body and they should wash their hands thoroughly with soap after viewing it. Religious rituals that do not require touching of the body may be allowed such as reading from religious scripts, sprinkling holy water. In cases where the family members are not in a position to perform last rites as they themselves may be infected or are not willing for fear of getting infected, the state/local administration may perform the last rites of the body, taking into account the religious/cultural factors. Those tasked with placing the body in the grave, or funeral pyre, should wear gloves and wash hands with soap and water after removal of the gloves once the burial is complete.⁶

In times of public health crisis like war, disasters and pandemics, the bodies of the dead should be treated with respect and dignity and uphold the right of bereaved families to know what happened to their loved ones. Moreover, the National Human Rights Commission released an advisory to the public, calling for a special law to uphold the dignity of the dead since there are multiple reports of dead bodies buried along the banks of the river Ganga.⁷ It is recommended that there should not be mass burials/cremations or piling up of bodies during the transportation as it is in violation of the right to dignity of the dead. Mass fatality management and emergency responses are important to respecting the dignity of the deceased and surviving family. There is also a need to provide spiritual interventions both for the living and

the dead.⁸ The management of dead bodies following global public health crisis needs to be informed by public health experts and supported by regional and international institutes and agencies.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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