

THE REPERCUSSIONS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE WELLBEING OF OLDER PEOPLE IN MALAYSIA: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the pandemic COVID-19 virus worldwide has reinforced the need to understand the impacts of this infectious disease and the population that is most severely affected by it, which is the older people. This paper aims to provide focused research on the repercussions of this pandemic on the older people in Malaysia. COVID-19 is the scientific name coined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in regards to the recent pandemic that critically hit 216 countries in the world along with Malaysia. As of 24th August 2020, there are over 23 million people infected and 800,906 deaths worldwide and the figures are still increasing at an alarming rate daily. Therefore, a safe and effective vaccine against COVID-19 is highly needed by an individual, a community or a country. Official reports by the WHO has confirmed that people who are most vulnerable to this disease are the older people due to a weaker immune system. COVID-19 hit the world in the least expected way which countries all over the world are still working on public policies that can sustain economically in a stable momentum while providing adequate protection to the people especially the older people. Although Malaysia has been hailed as one of the five pinnacles of countries that have successfully controlled the spread of the virus from infecting more people in the country while providing beneficial welfare support to its citizens, the impacts of the pandemic COVID-19 on older people are still significant. In this paper, an extensive and updated literature review on COVID-19 and its impacts on the wellbeing of older people in Malaysia is presented.

Key words: Older people, COVID-19, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The term 'pandemic' has been discussed in various forms of statement across different research disciplines. A pandemic is often associated with a global outbreak of a disease that is caused by the spread of human-to-human infection (Qiu et al. 2017). The World Health Organization or known as WHO has defined pandemic in the simplest description that is a global spread of a new disease (WHO, 2010). There are also numerous studies on the impacts of the pandemic that have been widely explored by researchers all over the world (Usher et al. 2020; Petrosillo et al. 2020; Qiu et al. 2017). The recent pandemic namely COVID-19, that struck 216 countries in the world has brought us to discuss the severity of its impacts on the vulnerable group that are older people, in Malaysia. Different countries may have different age classifications for older people. Countries like Japan and Singapore classified people that age 65 years old and above as older people (Chang & Mansur, 2018; Reynolds, 2017) but in Malaysia, an individual age 60 years old and above is considered an older person (Chang et al. 2020; National Population and Family Development Board, 2016). Given that there are many associated terms, older people will be operationalised to allow a better characterisation for this study. One of the government aims is to promote healthy ageing (The Eleventh Malaysia Plan 2016-2020, 2015) and it is believed that the recent pandemic, COVID-19 has significantly disrupted government's initiative in promoting the healthy ageing community. Further in this paper, an extensive literature review on the impacts of the pandemic on older people in Malaysia will be presented.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely discussed by the researchers from all parts of the world in regards to its impact on environments (Kanniah et al. 2020; Kumari & Toshniwal, 2020; Mahato et al. 2020; Muhammad et al. 2020; Nadzir et al. 2020), economics (Hasanat et al. 2020; Shakeel et al. 2020), human health (Adhikari et al. 2020; Mandal & Pal, 2020), mental wellbeing (Ahmed et al. 2020; Elengoe, 2020) and socio-economic (Abdullah et al. 2020; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). It has also been acknowledged that since the 2nd World War in 1939, this is not a surprising result as to date, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the magnitude of challenges faced by humankind (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). Hence, this paper aims to provide in-depth and up-to-date literature on the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the wellbeing of older people in Malaysia. The novelty of this paper is the discussions on how the wellbeing of the older people in Malaysia is being compromised during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic is a new catastrophic event that never happened in Malaysia before and it is the hardest challenge to Malaysia in this modern time. Therefore, the literature review in this paper is relatively important to gerontologists and other researchers that are involved in COVID-19 studies as it provides an extensive literature review on COVID-19 and its impacts on older people for the framework and health policy development.

PROBLEM STATEMENTS

As highlighted in other studies, COVID-19 is not a common challenge that is faced by the humankind (Elengoe, 2020) as its impacts on economic, socio-economic, health, mental wellbeing and other aspects have exceeded other pandemics that occurred in the past (Gilbert, 2020). COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a new challenge to healthcare sectors in Malaysia in terms of the practices in managing the patients especially older patients and therefore, continuous search for effective practices in this field are required (Tay et al. 2020). COVID-19 virus is found to be more transmissible than other coronaviruses (Gilbert, 2020) and early studies on COVID-19 argued that the COVID-19 virus is less fatal than MERS-CoV due to its low fatality rate (Petrosillo et al. 2020; Gilbert, 2020). Despite these studies, the impacts of COVID-19 and the wellbeing of the older people in Malaysia still lacks more significant theoretical support since few reports are describing the mortality rate associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 has infected over 23 million people globally, and 800,906 people have died from complications of the disease (WHO, 2020). Due to higher fatality rate and mental illness associated with COVID-19 among older people, more attention should be placed on the older population, taking into account that the older people must comply more appropriately to preventive measures for an undetermined period. This paper is aimed to describe and link the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic to the wellbeing of older people in Malaysia. The findings from the past studies on older people may not be identical or supportive to the findings of the current studies due to the influences of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of older people.

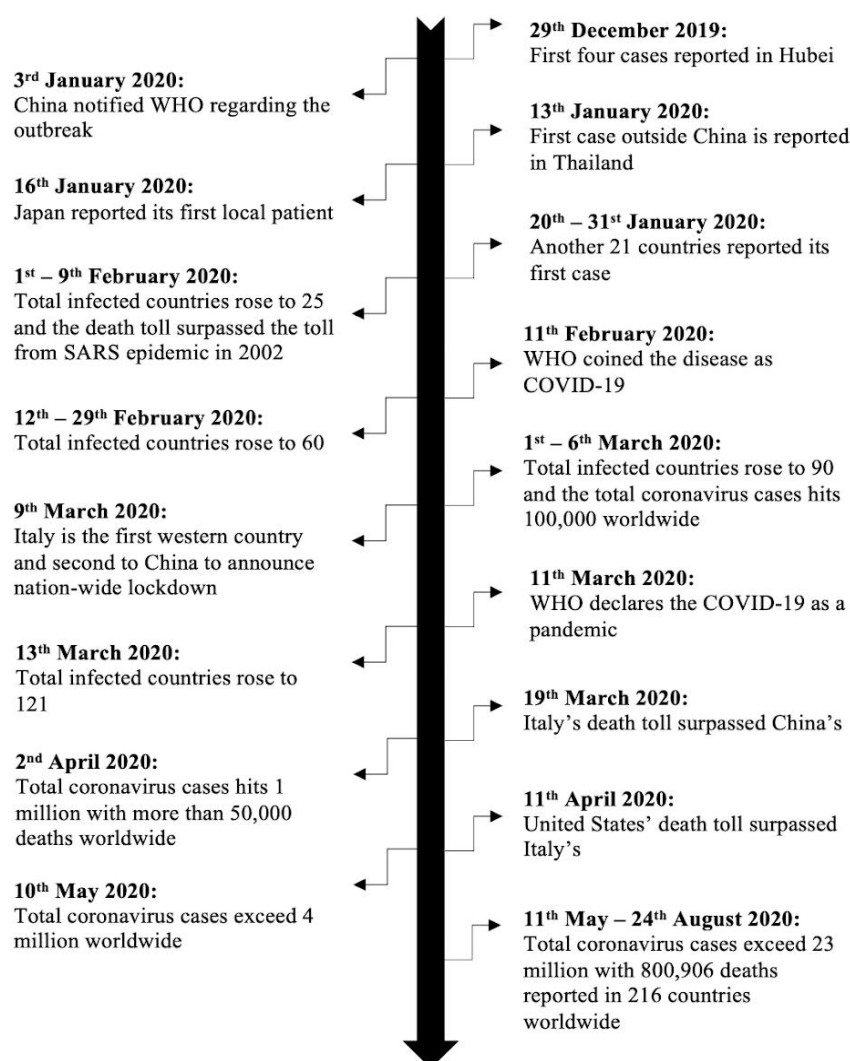
METHODOLOGY

This study has been undertaken as a literature review based on the guidelines proposed by Green et al. (2006). This method is purported to assess secondary studies found in journals and conference proceedings.

HISTORY OF THE COVID-19 OUTBREAK

The very first official case of COVID-19 was reported in December 2019 at Wuhan City, China (Adhikari et al. 2020; Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; See et al. 2020). As the number of cases began to grow, Wuhan health commission in the Hubei province of the Republic of China informed the National Health Commission, China CDC and WHO, there was a cluster of 27 cases of pneumonia with unidentified causes that were associated with Huanan Seafood Market (Kakodkar et al. 2020). Before the virus was officially coined as COVID-19 by WHO on 12th February 2020 (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020), it was originally known as 'Wuhan pneumonia' due to its link to the area where it was first detected as the patients were experiencing an onset of flu-like symptoms which would eventually be developed into pneumonia (Liu et al. 2020). During its infancy period of detection, consumption of bats was suspected to be the main cause of COVID-19 infection in humans but later on, with further investigations, the pangolin was identified as the intermediate host between bats and humans (Liu, et al. 2020). The first official case of COVID-19 outside China was reported on 13th January 2020 in Thailand, a tropical nation in Indochina (WHO, 2020; Sookaromdee & Wiwanitkit, 2020). The patient is a 61 years old lady from Wuhan, China (WHO, 2020). The third country that reported its first COVID-19 patient in Japan and it is a different case compared to Thailand because the patient is a Japanese man, who travelled to Wuhan City, China in late December 2019 (WHO, 2020). Subsequently, more countries were reported to have COVID-19 cases in the middle-January 2020 onwards (WHO, 2020). On 11th March 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 as a global pandemic (Liu et al. 2020) due to its rapid increase in the numbers of cases associated with the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide (Kakodkar et al. 2020). Below is the timeline showing when COVID-19 first discovered and how COVID-19 become a global pandemic:

Figure 1: COVID-19 Timeline



GLOBAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

The unforeseen challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have profoundly created global impacts on this world. It has been reported that there is a significant drop in air pollution notably in the Southeast Asian region as a result of lesser economic activities (Kanniah et al. 2020). Other developed economies like Italy, France and the United States also experienced significant improvement in the atmospheric environment (Muhammad et al. 2020). The main reason behind this effect is because of the major lockdown executed by the government in every affected country, which significantly reduced carbon emissions from byproducts from the economic activities such as PM₁₀, PM_{2.5}, NO₂, SO₂ and O₃ that were identified as the major contributors to environmental pollution (Kumari & Toshniwal, 2020; Nadzir et al. 2020; Mahato et al. 2020). Research has shown that there was an improvement in the environment as a result of the major lockdown which led to positive spillover effects on human health (Mandal & Pal, 2020). However, prolongation in lockdown demobilised the global economy as the overall economic activities were put on hold to combat the widespread of the COVID-19 virus (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020; Hasanat et al. 2020; Mandal & Pal, 2020; Shah et al. 2020). Apart from the environmental impacts, this pandemic has also drawn attention to the increase in the death rate around the world (Weinberger et al. 2020). As of 24th August 2020, the total deaths caused by COVID-19 pandemic is 800,906 and over 20% of the total deaths contributed by the United States (WHO, 2020). The effects of COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a temporary ban on wildlife trade as it is believed that COVID-19's existence in this world was due to the consumption of exotic animals that occurred in Huanan Seafood Market (Chakraborty & Maity, 2020). As such, this will create a significant change in consumption patterns especially in the rural areas of China as well as to reinforce the protection of wildlife in preventing the extinction of certain species (Xu & Yang, 2020). In a similar vein, there is a rapid surge in the use of e-Wallet and mobile payments during this pandemic as changes within the household lifestyle evolved (Liu et al. 2020). Other than a lifestyle change, studies discovered that cases like anxiety, depression and abuse of alcohol increase during the pandemic (Ahmed et al. 2020; Elengoe, 2020). People in the age group of 21 to 40 years old were found to be more susceptible to mental illness (Ahmed et al. 2020).

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE WELLBEING OF OLDER PEOPLE IN MALAYSIA

There is a consensus among health experts that age is the most significant factor in decreasing one's chances of surviving COVID-19, especially after age 65 (Daoust, 2020; Ehni & Wahl, 2020). The risk of infection rises with age, and in people with chronic or non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as diabetes, obesity, heart or kidney disease, or cancer. Among all the age groups, older people were more likely to be prone to the COVID-19 virus (Clark et al. 2020; Pelicioni & Lord, 2020; Shah et al. 2020) and who often live with poor socioeconomic conditions as well as inadequate access to healthcare services (Hossain, Mazumder, Tasnim, Nuzhath, & Sultana, 2020). In Malaysia, the Ministry of Health (MOH) reported that the highest incidence of COVID is among those aged 55 to 69. The rate of incidence of coronavirus per 100,000 population is highest among those aged 60 to 64, followed by those aged 55-59, and finally among those aged 65-69. Several studies have confirmed that coronavirus can cause various health implications such as pneumonia, fever, breathing difficulty and lung infection even to a healthy person (Adhikari et al. 2020; Elengoe, 2020; Sun et al. 2020). Like all countries affected by the pandemic, older people in Malaysia had the highest risk of complications and deaths from COVID-19 infections due to the age factor and chronic illnesses where 62.6 percent of deaths are among those aged 60 and above. Together, these studies indicate that greater attention is needed in this age group as the disease develops faster in older people than the young (Sun et al. 2020). This problem is possible due to uneven distribution, insufficient availability and difficulty of information, both geographically and spatially.

Socio-economic problems such as unemployment and poverty rise during COVID-19. For instance, data from the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) showed that the unemployment rate increased further to 5.3 percent in May 2020 to record 826,100 unemployed persons. Such a situation could affect both householders and older adults living with their families. Geographic location has also become a strain to older people, especially people living in rural areas. With the lack of mobility in remote areas, older adults are less likely to receive timely and appropriate care for COVID-19 and other health problems as access to regular care services have become even more limited.

In the ongoing pandemic, data suggests that older males are at higher risk than older females (Clark et al. 2020; Sun et al. 2020). The amount of severe and critical cases in older women are also less obvious and this could perhaps be due to various underlying factors. Results also suggest that older males with underlying health conditions are the most vulnerable to this COVID-19 virus (Clark et al. 2020) due to a degradation in the immune system of older people as their age progresses (Koff & Williams, 2020; Chang & Mansur, 2018).

The virus does not only threaten older people's lives and health, it also threatens their social networks. As the number of detected cases in Malaysia increased, the Malaysian government has implemented a Movement Control Order (MCO) or otherwise known as the partial lockdown on 18th March 2020 to control the rate of increase in COVID-19 cases in Malaysia (Ho & Tang, 2020; Shah et al. 2020). However, the implementation of MCO brings adverse effects to older people's physical and mental health as the cardiorespiratory fitness of older people declines due to lack of physical activity and the mental health of older people is compromised due to lack of social interaction (Elengoe, 2020; Peliocini & Lord, 2020). Violence towards elderly people increases with lockdowns and diminished treatment (United Nations, 2020). For instance, the pandemic has created psychological distress among the people including the older people, which could lead to suicide intention (Shanmugam et al. 2020; Simard & Volicer, 2020). Subsequently, the media report has also confirmed that there was a 62 years old suspected COVID-19 patient have succumbed into depression and committed suicide in Serdang Hospital, Selangor (Elengoe, 2020).

It is also found that other issues associated with older people during the pandemic include the cybercrime which involved money scamming. Since older people have traditionally been most vulnerable in their homes, the risk of certain forms of victimization during coronavirus may have increased (Payne, 2020). The spike in tech support scams among older people suggests "poor fraud awareness." Poor fraud awareness is tantamount to insecurity within the context of daily activities (Payne, 2020). There is evidence that older people are insecure with the sharing of personal and financial information due to an increase in the number of cybercrimes during the pandemic (Tan et al. 2020). While physical distancing is important, initiatives of social support and tailored care for older people need to be supported, particularly by increasing their literacy and safe access to digital technology.

Among the strongest consensus regarding COVID-19 is that older people are by far the most vulnerable population group (Daoust, 2020). It is highly likely that the ongoing pandemic would lead to significant improvements in the Malaysian public and private healthcare systems particularly in the delivery of healthcare services to elderly people and their families. The public could also benefit from Virtual Health Advisory by accessing the Health Ministry's portal for updates and health information (MOH Malaysia, 2020). Together with the Social Welfare Department, the Ministry of Health has also conducted screening of staff and residents at 357 care centres registered under Act 506 (Care Centers Act 1993) and 26 nursing homes registered under Act 586 (Private Healthcare Facilities and Services Act 1998) (TheStar, 2020).

Considering the well-known higher mortality rate among the elderly, policy strategy around the world has focused especially on engaging elderly people and trying to encourage them to comply with preventive measures for public health (Daoust, 2020). This includes social distancing, regular handwashing, the wearing of masks and more importantly the clear recommendation of lockdown for the elderly. During the Movement Control Order (MCO) period, older people are encouraged to use the Medicine by Mail service for the medicine to be sent directly to them (MoH Malaysia, 2020). Apart from that, it is also the duty of family members, such as children or guardians living with the senior citizens, to ensure that they sought prompt care if they were unwell and to ensure that they had enough supply of medicine and held up to their appointment date.

Older people tend to face the indirect socioeconomic strain of COVID-19 in the absence of a structured and social care system. To minimize the economic burden due to COVID-19, the government has introduced the Prihatin Economic Stimulus Package.

Findings from the Special Survey 'Effect of Covid-19 on the Economy and Individual' showed that 96.8 percent of respondents have benefitted from the government assistance. 41 percent of Malaysians benefitted from the EPF cash withdrawals and private retirement. (DOSM, 2020). It is also reported that 70 percent of respondents agree that various assistance in the Prihatin Economic Stimulus Package is effective in reducing financial burden.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on past literature, the existence of COVID-19 in this world has affected all spheres of life, especially the social and economic aspect. The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have forced the government to redesign its public policies and society to embrace the 'new normal' after the COVID-19 pandemic (Abdullah et al. 2020). More people are coming to their senses about the adverse effects of the consumption of exotic wildlife and supported the permanent ban on wildlife trade (Humane Society International, 2020). The experience gained from global efforts to deal with COVID-19 will enable countries worldwide to plan for disease control for new disease outbreaks, disease epidemics and possible pandemics (Elengoe, 2020). From the above literature review, it is acknowledged that older people's wellbeing during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has been compromised as the older people have to adapt to the new norms such as no mass gathering, social distancing and others. There is a need to develop effective programs to reach and access the most disadvantaged groups in our society, including how to empower and allow people to prepare mentally and effectively plan potential scenarios. Thus, greater attention is needed to ensure the older people can adapt to the new environment and actively participate in social and economic activities. This paper however only provides a narrative overview of the impacts of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of older people in Malaysia. Future researchers can take this opportunity in improvising and completing this study via the development of a theoretical framework and results from data analyses for future papers.

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