

Effects of COVID-19 Waves on Elderly People

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ABSTRACT

Background: The novel Coronavirus has affected most of the counties in the world and created apprehension in senior citizens. As the ageing population has low immunity, the pandemic creates more and more causalities with them. **Objective:** This study focuses on the socio-psychological problems associated with ageing population during COVID-19 and tries to suggest basic initiatives to curb the issues. **Methodology:** This study is based on data collected from secondary sources like newspaper and magazine articles. **Results:** The strict practice of COVID-19 appropriate behaviour is the basic necessity to control the spread of the pandemic. **Conclusion:** The waves of COVID-19 has brought the attention of the entire globe towards the elderly population and it also demands enough care and respect for the senior citizens. This is a time which requires all possible efforts to be taken to concentrate on older adults and protect them from the risk of Coronavirus.

Keywords: COVID Waves, Elderly population, Loneliness, Social isolation, Social inclusion.

Introduction

The return of COVID-19 has created fear and anxiety across people in India as it comes with unique symptoms like: shortness of breath, sore throat, dry cough, muscle ache and loss of smell. According to Mr. Balaram Bhargava, the Director General of Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) who is also the Co-Chairperson of Task Force of COVID-19, there is not a very high difference in the death rate of COVID-19 hospitalised patients in between the first (9.6%) and second (9.7%) waves. The oxygen requirement is higher in the second wave (54.5%) as compared to the first wave (41.1%). But the requirement of ventilator is lower in the patients who are hospitalised in second wave (27.8%) as compared to the first wave (37.3%). More people experienced shortness of breath in the second wave (47.5%) as compared to the first wave (41.7%). The data is collected from COVID registry of hospitalised patients of 40% across the country.

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/over-70-of-covid-19-patients-above-40-years-in-both-waves-older-population-still-more-vulnerable/article-show/82144664.cms> In the first wave the hospitalised

patients were 7600 (September–November, 2020) and in the second wave (March–April, 2021) 1,885 patients were hospitalized across the country.

(https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/over-70-of-covid-19-patients-above-40-years-in-both-waves-older-population-still-more-vulnerable/article-show/82144664.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst) The second wave of Covid-19 was more dangerous and damaging than the first wave as on 10th February 2021, the infection of daily cases were 11,000 and on 30th April 2021 it was 370,000. The Delhi High Court has called the second wave as “Tsunami”. The second wave has come with more infectious variants which has wreaked chaos with people and healthcare systems across India (Warrier, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO), made the assessment in March 2020, that COVID-19 is a global pandemic as it has captured the entire world and created life risk and stress throughout the population. During the Covid-19 outbreak it is advisable by WHO to take care of mental health and psychological well-being of senior citizens. (<https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/>

[coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf](https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/covid-19-patients-above-65-years-of-age-more-prone-to-reinfection-study-121031900336_1.html))

According to the scientists of Staten Serum Institute of Denmark, elderly people above the age of 65 are more prone to reinfection (Dutta, 2021). The researchers have stated that there is 0.88% of chances of reinfection among the elderly people over the age of 65 and they have suffered in both first and second waves of COVID. At the same time, it is very difficult to refrain from the virus as the mutants are varied with different COVID-19 strains (Dutta, 2021). Therefore, after being vaccinated the elderly should enhance their measures of social distancing (https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/covid-19-patients-above-65-years-of-age-more-prone-to-reinfection-study-121031900336_1.html)

Most elderly people face health issues like: Parkinson's or Alzheimer's diseases which destroy memory and makes slow the mental function and nervous system. They continuously face decline in thinking, experience irritation, behavioural changes and fear which disrupt their ability to live independently. (<https://parkinsonsdisease.net/elderly-population>). Even the environmental changes create health issues for them as they have low immunity. The older adults after their retirement have enough time to be connected socially. (<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12603-020-1500-7>). The pandemic has put restrictions on social gatherings and visits outside. Social isolation during COVID-19 pandemic affects both physical and mental condition of elderly people. They suffer from poor sleep, anxiety, depression and physical weakness (Loyola, Sanchez, Rodriguez, Ganz, Torralba, Oliveria and Z-Manas 2020). These people have also faced economic uncertainty due to the pandemic. They are not only socially disrupted but also most of them are financially weak. Financial constraint, old age requirements, and social isolation create panic situation across the ageing population (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/government-covid-19-resources-older-adults>). This article is based on the recent data collected from newspapers and aims to focus on the problems associated with anxiety and isolation of elderly persons due to COVID-19 pandemic and to suggest few strategies to curb their issues.

Review of Literature

Dutta (2021) has cited the statements of three senior-most members of National COVID Task Force - NitiAayog Member Paul, VK., Bhargava, B., who is the ICMR Director General and Guleria, R., who is the Director of AIIMS, Delhi have stated in a press conference that 70%

of patients of 40 years and above are affected by both the waves of COVID-19. The second wave of COVID-19 may heavily affect young people, but it does not leave the elderly people. Dutta (2021) has stated that in both the waves of COVID-19 the elderly people have suffered a lot. Banerjee (2020), stated that COVID-19 has put the entire world in threat as it is directly related to the age and immune system. The virus can be transmitted easily and quickly to low immunity and ageing people. To be protected from the virus the senior citizens are advised to maintain strict isolation and complete hygiene. According to Tripathy, S., Kar, S., Roy, D. and Mishra, S. (2020), the Coronavirus has severely captured the entire globe since the beginning of 2020 and this pandemic has heavily affected the geriatric population. The lockdown, financial losses, reduction in standard of living, scarcity of infrastructure and high mortality rate have created emotional breakdown in people. The ageing group lives in fear and stress. The authors have remarked that public awareness towards health hygiene and environmental cleanness are necessary to protect the elderly. Mukhtar (2020), has done a study on the impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of geriatrics in a particular manner. The author has viewed that the older adults commonly face depression and anxiety, but due to rapid transmission of the virus and high mortality their mental health is affected severely. Banerjee (2020), has stated that COVID-19 has strong psycho-social implications as it creates crucial health issues which hampers psychological stability and certain sections of society like senior citizens who live in risk. The ageing people are in chaos as the virus suddenly affects them and puts their lives in danger. The author has suggested that the family members should take additional care of the elderly and provide their complete support and concern. Bhatia and Sud (2020) have discussed issues related to mental illness like anxiety and depression in elderly people due to social isolation. Kashyaap (2021), has focused on the widespread misery which has been brought by the second wave of Covid-19 and suggested valuable strategies for the well-being of parents and grandparents. The author has also praised the consciousness of older adults as they are practicing Covid-appropriate behaviour like social distancing, using of mask and sanitizers in their daily lives.

Objectives of the Study

- To identify the issues associated with elderly people during COVID-19 pandemic.
- To focus on the socio-psychological effects on the ageing group of population due to pandemic.
- To suggest strategies to overcome the challenges.

Issues Faced by Elderly Population during COVID-19 Waves

The second wave of COVID is more dangerous than the first wave as it transmits speedily. On 11th June, 2020 approximately 10,000 people were infected by first wave of COVID-19 which increased to 80,000 on 2nd September, 2020, whereas in the second wave on 22nd February, 2021 the number of cases were 10,000 and within 30–40 days interval the number raised to 80,000. The health experts have assumed the chances of heavy community spread because of increase in the number of suspects and advised for precautionary initiatives (Sinha, 2021). In the first wave of the pandemic nationwide lockdown has put the aging people in home arrest and to break the chain of infection during second wave several states like Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Goa, Odisha and many others are imposing curfews and lockdowns which also make all people confined to their residence (Nahata, 2021). The lockdown due to pandemic creates the feeling of loneliness, anxiety and isolation across elderly people and they do not get crowd and people around them. They do not even use public transport, go for regular health check-ups, morning exercises, worship places etc., which creates worries among them. They feel themselves at house arrest and sometimes neglected as the family members are busy in their own lives. At the same time, their aging immune system makes it very difficult to fight against Coronavirus

and they are immediately affected by the disease. Their recoveries are complicated and very slow as most of them are suffering from different diseases related to heart, lungs, blood pressure, allergies along with some other diseases which make their conditions more vulnerable (Sundararajan, 2020). Both the waves of COVID have brought sever challenges for elderly people. The COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown have forced them to maintain social isolation and bear a stressful life. Nearly 63% of elderly persons are suffering from depression and loneliness due to social isolation. The older people are afraid of the consequences of the pandemic which has long lasting impact on both physical and mental health (<https://thewire.in/health/covid-19-mental-health-elderly-people>). According to the report of Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) older adults are more likely to suffer from COVID-19 as more than 80% of death cases are reported across the age group of 65 and older. The following table explains the causalities in further detail:

The above table represents the high life-risk of elderly adults. The death rate is 10 times higher in the age group of 18–29 by comparing with 5–17 years old. Similarly, as compared with 5–17 years old, the death rate is 45 times higher in the age group 30–39 and 130 times higher in the age group 40–49. Similarly, it is 3200 times higher in the age group 75–84 and in the age group more than 85 the death rate is more than 8700 times. As there is increase in range of age, the risk of death is increasing and it is

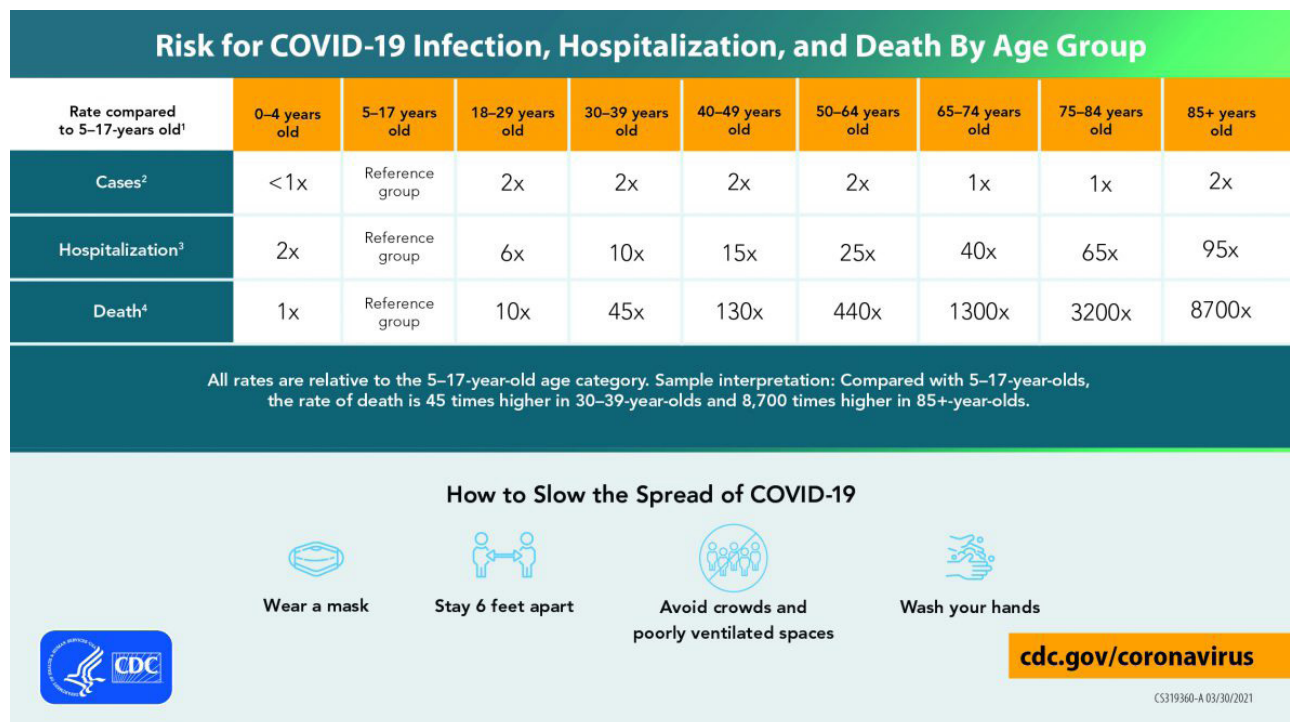


Figure 1.

Source: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>

highest in case of senior citizens or elderly people. This table also exhibits the pictures of COVID appropriate behaviour like wearing the mask, maintaining social distance, avoiding crowd and washing the hands with soap regularly (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>).

Socio-Psychological Condition of Elderly people

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a large number of intricacies in human life and livelihood of the entire world and at the same time it has created a fear and anxiety in senior citizens. During the first wave of COVID-19 there has been nationwide lock down to control the spread of the disease. At the same time using hygienic measures and social distancing have become the basic ways to secure lives. The second wave has come with more powerful and energetic variant mutants which can be transmissible very quickly. As there is fear of community spread many states have declared curfews and lockdowns. The invention of vaccine is a strong weapon against the COVID-19, but there is the chance of reinfection of elderly people if they do not follow the COVID appropriate behaviour.

(https://www.business-standard.com/article/current-affairs/covid-19-patients-above-65-years-of-age-more-prone-to-reinfection-study-121031900336_1.html). The COVID-19 has increased mental health issues like depression, anxiety with older adults. To focus on the basic impacts of lockdown during first wave of COVID-19 a study has been conducted by "Samvedana" which consists of respondents of forty years. According to the study 33% respondents are having difficulties related to sleep, 83% to perform daily activities and household work and 86% participants have reported low mood and more strain comes from people working from home. Again 33% have reported on loss of well-being due to family conflict during lockdown, 22% older adults have spoken with mental health professionals and 63% respondents have communicated with friends and family to reduce their strain. However, in second wave 33% respondents of ageing population are in fear of the virus and they are also stressful for the well-being of the family (www.financial-express.com, 20th May, 2021).

Social isolation during COVID-19 pandemic affects both physical and mental condition of senior citizens. The daily lives are also disrupted due to confined lives in four boundaries of homes. The regular wandering, meeting with neighbours and face-to-face communication of elderly adults with their friends and associations are

blocked completely. Life becomes stagnant for most of the ageing people as they even do not move outside to attend any religious ceremony or get-together. The changing lifestyle and social distancing put lots of psychological pressure on them. They suffer from poor sleep, anxiety, depression and physical weakness (Loyola, W.S., Sanchez, R., Rodriguez, P., Ganz, F., Torralba, R., Oliveria, D.V. and Z-Manas, L.R. 2020). According to Dr. Rajesh Parekh who is a neuropsychiatric and head of the Jaslok Hospital Medical Centre the COVID-19 has brought large number of cases of stress-related problems, depression and anxiety. Most of the elderly people have a sense of isolation even in their families and the second wave of the pandemic has made them more isolated by keeping them home bound (Bhatia, 2021) (<https://thewire.in/health/podcast-covid-19-mental-health>).

According to the study of "NGO Age well Foundation" the Second Wave of COVID-19 has increased mental health disorder symptoms like anxiety, heavy stress, depression, sleeplessness, fatigue and weakness in elderly people. On the basis of data collected by the organization this study has revealed that out of total respondents 82.4% people have faced anxiety, 62% depression, 55% weakness and fatigue, 52.2% loss of appetite and 70% of respondents have suffered from insomnia or poor quality of sleep due to return of COVID-19 and growing causalities. Rath, H. the founder of the organization has stated the senior citizens are also worried about getting a bed and proper treatment in hospitals. Due to loneliness, home isolation particularly who are living or forced to live alone without family care and support and added with poor health status and low immune system have divested the life and mental health of senior citizens (<https://thewire.in/health/covid-19-mental-health-elderly-people>) (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/amid-raging-second-covid-19-wave-the-elderly-battle-loneliness-and-anxiety/articleshow/82127157.cms?from=md>)

There are some cases of interviews taken by reporters of "Economic Times" on 18th April, 2021 which can be explained below.

Rajesh Singh, 66 years old, has been living in west Delhi with his wife, Sudha who is 61 years old, states that the waves of COVID has stopped their lives, but they are trying not to stop. Due to home isolation they are not able to meet their friends and there is nobody in the home to talk with them which creates a stressful situation. According to Mrs. Sudha they are afraid to go to regular health check-ups. The couple is also worried for their children who are living abroad.

According to Sarin, an elderly adult who has been living independently for a pretty long period and she is in good relation with her neighbours and relatives for which she does not feel lonely. But the Covid waves have made her isolated and she is suffering from anxiety due to lack of physical communication.

Archana Sinha, 65, has been living alone since 2010 in Mayur Vihar, Delhi. She has been vaccinated, but still she is in fear of infection. She has good support of friends and neighbours which the waves of COVID has broken down and gradually the communication through phones has been reduced (<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/amid-raging-second-covid-19-wave-the-elderly-battle-loneliness-and-anxiety/article-show/82127157.cms?from=mdr>).

Older adults are basically connected with emotions. They have deep affection towards their community and groups from which they belong. The waves of COVID-19 have made them isolated and lonely by restricting them from meeting their group members physically. As a result the chain of group sharing-caring and concern has been broken down and the senior citizens are moving towards mental decline. The social disorder has put the ageing group in anxiety and depression and the status of their physical health is also being affected. (https://www.challenge.gov/assets/netlify-uploads/social-isolation-resource_08042020.pdf)

Strategies to Curb the Issues

The waves of COVID has adversely affected both the physical and psychological well-being of elderly people. They have faced severe disruptions in their daily routines, and lack of adaptability with technology again has created complications in their lives. They are socially isolated and spend their times within four walls of their boundary. To make the elderly people free from fear and reduce their heavy stress there are certain strategies which can be explained in the following manner. These are creating awareness, obeying COVID guidelines, vaccination acceptance, internet adaptability and distance maintenance.

a. Creation of awareness

It is very vital for the elderly people to be aware of the basic causes, sources and symptoms of the pandemic and take remedial actions on that basis. The older adults having immunocompromised health systems are facing high risk from the virus. They must be cautious of the COVID-19 symptoms like fever, breathing difficulties, fatigue, cough and loss of smell and other

difficulties. The right sources of information should be accessed which will help the aging group not to be biased and panic. The COVID awareness helps the elderly people to ensure healthcare facilities and protect themselves from the virus (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/government-covid-19-resources-old-er-adults>). The awareness of elderly people along with being vaccinated can reduce 94% of risk of COVID-19. The older people aged 65 and more who have taken both the doses of vaccine are protected from illness, hospitalization and death. (https://www.cdc.gov/aging/covid19/covid19-older-adults.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fneed-extra-precautions%2Folder-adults.html)

The family concern will be helpful for the ageing group to create awareness regarding the COVID-19 and get rid of their anxiety. According to Dr. Jayashree Dasgupta, Clinical psychologist and the co-founder of "Samvedna Senior Care", the great challenge for elderly people is to deal with their psychological issues and to improve their mental awareness for more adaptive with changing circumstances. They can also practice physical exercise and meditation to enhance their immunity. Hence, creation of awareness regarding COVID-19, emotional support of family members and well-wishers act as the best strategy which helps the ageing population to overcome stress and fear (<https://www.moneylife.in/article/shift-in-behaviour-of-elderly-during-second-covid-wave-samvedna-senior-care-survey/63956.html>)

b. Obeying COVID Guidelines Strictly

The COVID appropriate behaviours are very vital precautions for elderly persons during waves of COVID-19. Many times the older adults are more likely to break the COVID guidelines as compared to the youngsters (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/11/13/older-people-likely-break-lock-down-rules-young-ones-study-finds/>). They should wear double protective masks when visiting outside and also clean that regularly. The ageing people should strictly avoid crowd and maintain social isolation. They also have to wash their hands with alcoholic soaps and hand wash and use pocket sanitizer. The Government interventions are playing very active role to take care of senior citizens. The elderly people living alone are the worst sufferers in COVID-19 crisis. On the basis of the order of the Supreme Court it is the duty of all the states to provide necessary medicines, sanitizers and masks to all elderly people and to ensure that the eligible older mass should get their pension timely (<https://www.>

deccanherald.com/opinion/why-it-s-important-to-tend-to-the-mental-health-of-the-elderly-during-covid-19-852770.html.)

c. Vaccine Acceptance

Staying away from rumours and biases and accepting vaccine is the basic necessity of life which will protect the elderly people from COVID-19. According to the evaluation (January-March, 2021) under real-world conditions conducted in fourteen states at twenty four hospitals it is reported that the elderly people who have taken two doses of COVID-19 vaccine have less chance to be affected. The risk is reduced about 94% of adults 65 age or more who have received both doses of COVID vaccine (https://www.cdc.gov/aging/covid19/covid19-older-adults.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fneed-extra-precautions%2Folder-adults.html) The Government has also taken initiatives like door to door vaccine for this vulnerable group of citizens. The home care service providers are very helpful for elderly persons during waves of COVID-19. They are taking care of day-to-day activities of senior adults from ensuring vaccination to help them in emergencies. A balanced diet, good sleep, physical and mental exercise along with COVID appropriate behaviour should be maintained even after taking vaccine as older adults have more chances of reinfection due to low immunity power (<https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/multimedia/video/covid-second-wave-eldercare-at-home-rise-in-demand/article34597542.ece>)

d. Internet Adaptability

Internet provides emotional support to elderly people who are away from their near and dear ones. The senior citizens who are adept with technology can easily use Facebook, mails, WhatsApp etc., to be connected with their family, friends and relatives. They can also use videoconference, tele-conference etc. to make face-to-face contact with social distancing with their well-wishers (Subudhi & Palai, 2020). At the same time attending the online wellness programs like online health care facilities with the help of tele-counselling and tele-consultation will be helpful for the elderly people to reduce their stress level and depression. (Sundararajan, 2020). Social support through social media creates a sense of we-feeling among elderly mass and they can easily exchange their thoughts and be free from mental stress. They can take the advantage of tele-medicine, set reminder for basic needs, stay safe at home by making e-transactions related to online-shopping, e-banking, gossiping, and entertainment etc. They should also avail the door step delivery services by

using online transactions (<https://thewire.in/health/covid-19-mental-health-elderly-people>)

e. Distance Maintenance

It is very important that the elderly people should always maintain minimum 6 feet distance from others while going outside. It will protect them from attack of Coronavirus. Before going outside they should be conscious about the safety measures first and it will be better not to touch anybody by shaking hands or hugging. Maintaining the physical distance and avoiding social inclusion are very difficult, but these are the basic precautionary measures. It is also advisable for senior citizens not to meet anybody and not to go outside if not urgent. They should also keep in mind not to touch their eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands (<https://www.nhsinform.scot/illness-and-conditions/>).

Conclusion

The older adults are the assets of society as their worldly experiences influence the future generation. They are at their extreme stage of lifecycle where they need support and concern of the family members as well as the society. The waves of COVID-19 has brought the attention of the entire globe towards the elderly mass and it also demands enough care and respect for the senior citizens. This is the time when we should focus our concentration on older adults and protect them from the risk of Coronavirus. This study is trying to draw the attention of readers on elderly people who have spent their entire lives for their family members and society. The issues they have faced and their socio-psychological conditions have been discussed in this article. This article also attempts to provide some suggestions to curb the issues and make the life normal. The lockdown, shutdown and other restrictions are helpful to spend the time together with family members. The elderly people may share their experiences of life and young mass can learn lessons from them. Similarly, the tech-savvy generation can update senior people with latest technology or use of internet, laptops, mobiles etc., and the gap of generation and communication will be bridged easily. Hence, the elderly people are the backbone of our lives as the family is incomplete without them. The pandemic has brought critical situations for the older adults and taught us the lesson to be concerned for them and a little negligence must invite risk and they may leave us only to repent for the days to come. This is the duty of the family members to take proper care of older adults, spend more times with them and make them feel that they are socially isolated, but not lonely. The help age or old-care shelters

should also give more stress on both physical and mental fitness of elderly people. The older adults are free birds to fly and this phase of pandemic will be over soon if they strictly follow the COVID-appropriate behaviour and maintain the peace of mind.

Competing Interest Statement

I declare that I have no significant competing financial, professional, or personal interests that might have influenced the performance or presentation of the work described in this manuscript.

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