

Return to Work in Post COVID Phase in India: Media Reports Compilations

Namrata H¹; Sumeet Pokharnikar, M. Jawed Quereishi², Rajendra Awate³

¹Consultant, Planning and Innovation, Eurasian Cancer Research Council India office, ²State Planning Manager, Dept. Of Health & Family Welfare, Govt. of Chhattisgarh, India, ³Professor, Community medicine RKDF Medical College And Research Centre, Bhopal, India

Abstract

Summary: Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India (MOHFW, GOI) has published guidelines on preventive measures to contain spread of COVID-19 in workplace settings to respond in a timely and effective manner for detection and control of COVID-19 cases. It was first published on 17th March with subsequent revision on 15th April; 18th May and in June 2020. Despite timely and efficient implementation of the guidelines; there was a steep rise in COVID cases. This article attempts to review those guidelines holistically; to identify the gaps in them and the challenges in their implementation.

This study will address shortcomings in the guidelines and what can be done to rectify these shortcomings. There is a need for strengthening of current monitoring and evaluation system/ mechanism along with the provision of public health insurance.

Keyword: COVID, Policy, resuming work

Introduction

On 31st December 2019, health authorities in China reported to World Health Organization (WHO) a cluster of viral pneumonia cases of unknown cause in Wuhan, Hubei. In January 2020, WHO declared the outbreak of a new coronavirus disease in Hubei Province, China to be a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (**PHEIC**)^(1, 2, 3). COVID-19 pandemic in India is part of worldwide pandemic of coronavirus disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus -2 (**SARS COV-2**)^(2,3). The first case of COVID-19 in India, **having** travel history from China was reported on 30th January 2020^(2, 3,4). Worldwide, countries have responded by implementing extensive contact tracing, vigorous testing, travel restrictions, lockdowns and facility closures to check exposure^(4,5). Due to increase in number of COVID cases, India opted the strategy of lockdown and closure of facilities^(6, 8). COVID 19 spreads as droplet infection through cough or exhalation, touching contaminated surfaces or objects. People with the age of ≥ 40 years, pregnant women, children aged < 5 years, persons with

immunocompromised conditions such as diabetes, heart and lung disease are more vulnerable and have high chances of developing complexities/ serious illness^(2,7,8).

COVID pandemic of 2019 is responsible for largest global recession and has resulted in social and economic disruption worldwide^(9, 10). Recommended patient specific health education strategies for disease prevention included hand washing, maintaining personal hygiene and social distancing^(6, 9, 10). WHO has published guidelines on 3rd March 2020 for workplace readiness to tackle COVID situation^(5, 11, 12). Those guidelines included simple ways to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in workplace, managing COVID-19 risks while ongoing community transmission^(5, 6, 8, 9, 13). To prevent spread of COVID-19 in workplace, those guidelines advised on regular and thorough hand washing^(10,14,16). WHO has advised responsibility of ensure supply and availability of hand sanitizers with employers. WHO clearly advised symptomatic patients to stay indoors (confined to homes/ healthcare facilities)^(5, 12). *Present document highlights the public health preparedness planning for tackling COVID*

infection at workplace in India and how this would be done in better way.

Methodology: This review article has complied summary of all workplace related guidelines, SOPs published by government of India and related published articles during COVID epidemics. Effects of these guidelines on no of COVID Cases, strength and limitation of these guidelines are summarised. Along with how these can be addressed effectively has been suggested as well.

Government of India (GOI) Directives for resuming work during COVID (5,6,7,8,9):

GOI has timely published guidelines for public health preparedness for tackling COVID infection at workplace. India opted with country wise lockdown on 24th March 2020. GOI issued guidelines for social distancing at offices, workplaces, factories and other establishments in a process of gradually resuming routine work services with multiple revisions. First draft was published on 17th March in with subsequent revision on 15th April, 18th May and June 2020 with detailed standard operating procedures (SOP). It also advised Work from Home (WFH) for private-sector employees in nonessential services interim period of this surge of COVID cases. SOP has been devised to ensure the safety of the employees and ultimately to check the transmission of COVID. Employers (Essential Goods & Services enterprises) are permitted to function during the lockdown with strict adherence to these Guidelines, focused on employee's health, workplace hygiene and safety of customers.

Following activities are part of the SOPs for resuming work:

1. PPE usage and hygiene measures: Every organisation must ensure employee wears facemask. Employers must supply hand-wash and sanitizers adequately, preferably with a touch free mechanism at all entry points and common areas. **Primary responsibility rests with Employers** for Intensive training and communication on good hygiene practices, **wearing of face masks in the company premises, etc.**

2. Physical distancing, Prohibition of Congregation: It has been advised that the distance

between employees should be more than 6 feet at workplace. **Employer shall arrange Special Transportation from home to workplaces and back** at 30%-40% of passenger carrying capacity of the vehicle. . Timings of lunch and other breaks must also be staggered. The staggered working hours must be implemented over at least three 1-hourly blocks. This allowed **permitting** only 2-4 people at a time in lifts (**elevators**); encouraged use of staircase, etc.

3. Sanitation/ Disinfection: All areas of workplace including entrance gate, cafeteria, lifts, washroom, walls and other surfaces must be disinfected every day every shift .All vehicles and machinery entering the workplace should be disinfected. Strict ban on tobacco products and spitting in company premises.

4. Policy changes: All employees above the age of 65; Persons with comorbidities and parents with children below the age of five were encouraged to work from home. Non- essential visitors prohibited from visiting company premises. Employers should provide insurance to its employees. Use of "Arogyasetu" app was recommended.

5. Personalised Screening: Mandatory temperature scanning (with a contactless thermal thermometer) of every individual entering and exiting the workplace.

List of services- was released by GOI and MOHFW Including all health services together with AYUSH; All agriculture and horticulture activities; Operations of the fishing (marine/inland); financial sector; social sector; Animal husbandry; Plantation activities such as tea, coffee and rubber to functional with 50% of workers; Public Utilises and MNREGA works (Watershed, Irrigation and Flood management works), Agricultural and Livestock related works, Fisheries and works in coastal areas and the Rural Drinking water and Sanitation related works. Following activities were allowed such as supply of essential goods, Movement of loading and unloading of goods/cargo (inter and intra) state; Online teaching/distance learning; Commercial and private establishments; Industries/Industrial establishments (both government and private); Construction activities; Private vehicles for emergency services, including medical and veterinary care and for procuring essential commodities and all personnel travelling to the place of work. Offices of the government of India and offices of

the state was allowed to resume activities.

These guidelines advise employers to provide PPEs, including masks and sanitizers to its employees in order to protect them from COVID. The low-cost measures under these guidelines certainly helped to prevent the spread of other infections in workplaces, such as cold, flu and stomach bugs, and protected employees against these seasonal, endemic morbidities. Provision of health

insurance shall be the responsibility of employer under this guidance document. These guidelines tried to address health; safety and financial security of employees.

Results

Major Milestones in relation to COVID cases statistics has been described in following table (Source: WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard and India Ministry of Health website)

Table 1: Statistics of COVID cases in India and world with important milestones

Events	Timeline/ date published	COVID cases in India in world	COVID cases in World
First confirmed case of COVID in China	17/01/2020	0	5
First confirmed case of COVID in India	30/01/2020	1	7836
1st Draft of guideline/SOPs for workplaces to resume activity in COVID Situation resuming routine work services COVID	17/03/2020		191473
Lockdown imitated	24/03/2020	564	386969
Second draft revision of guidelines	15/04/2020	12,371	1921602
Third draft revision of guidelines	18/05/2020	90,927	4660870
‘COVID cases till First June	01/06/2020	190,535	6080983
Current COVID cases till date	15/07/2020	9,36,181	13,119,239

Indian economy has been gradually opened, and companies’ has resumed work following these guidelines precautiously. Companies gradually started with workforce as minimum as 5% and scaled up to 50 %^(9,11,12). Despite implementing these guidelines, a steep rise in COVID cases (Table 1) was observed. This reflects some shortcomings in either formulation or implementation of these guidelines.

Challenges and recommendations to tackle the challenges:

1. Classification of activities: Essentialness of Workplace activities are not classified for resuming for work in this COVID pandemic phase⁽¹⁴⁾.

Classification of essential and nonessential work processes was needed to decide further continuation or suspension of activity. Active involvement of District and state level officials was needed for classification of activities for resuming in this pandemic phase and their monitoring and evaluation. This should be supervised with

help of existing OSH Audit mechanism.

2. Challenges regarding WFH provisions

^(14,15): Work processes allowed under WFH (“Work from Home”) criteria were not clearly defined in these guidelines. Employee and employers may have biased opinion for these classification, gatekeeping is must. Despite of permission to work from home for non-essential services, companies’ struggle to cope technologically and behavioural challenges for implementing WFH to make it a seamless experience.

3. Specification of insurance coverage:

Specification and details of health insurance coverage was not clarified in these guidelines. Workers from Unorganised sector, daily wage workers and / or part time workers were not documented for considering insurance coverage ⁽¹⁶⁾.

Workers from Unorganised sector, Daily wage workers’ or part time workers shall be included under insurance coverage. Daily log of these worker shall be maintained by HR. Health insurance coverage shall specify details such as inpatient, outpatient, intensive care admission and death benefit for family.

4. Leave Benefits: Employees infected with mild/ moderate symptoms requiring hospitalisation or employee needing to stay in home isolation; details of leave benefits were not specified in this SOPs

Employee needing to stay in home isolation shall be allowed to take sick leave. Infected employee requiring isolation shall be allowed to take paid hospitalisation leave.

5. Monitoring and evaluation: Details of Monitoring and evaluation of essential and nonessential works was not specified. No supervision or check on daily logs with employees was mentioned. No Supervision or monitoring pattern for physical distancing along with deviation from routines was not specified.

Companies shall consider giving additional responsibility of supervision for monitoring of social benefit to existing supervisors. Existing available monitoring and evaluation systems for workplace audits at district and state levels shall be utilised along with coordination of **Directorate General Factory Advice and Labour Institutes** (DGIFASLI), technical arm to

assist the Ministry in formulating national policies on occupational safety and health in factories and docks.

6. Emotional and Mental health: Post-COVID new realities of working from home with additional responsibility of managing home front is challenging situation. Especially, female employee with kids managing home front alone, in absence of domestic helper and child care has been additional burden to the employees. Another concern is to address fear of contracting the virus at workplace and during travel.

Adjusting to this new lifestyle changes after COVID pandemics; emotional support is an essentially a need of the hour. Dedicated mental health helpline and psychologist will be new alternatives to help stressed employees. Employers shall take responsibility of these alternatives.

Conclusion

Guidelines for returning to work has played important role in ensuring Health and safety of employees in Pandemic period. Monitoring and evaluation of these recommendations shall be implemented in coordination with Directorate General, Factory Advice and Labour Institutes (DGFASLI) with available existing system of evaluation. Employers need adapt policies fitting baseline working conditions ensuring health and safety of employee, leading uninterrupted work continuity and productivity at workplace. Each worker should take ownership of their own Health and safety along with their co-workers. Successful ownership from employee and employers are of paramount importance in Control of COVID in pandemic era.

Conflict of Interest: The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest

Funding Support: The author(s) declare(s) that there is nil Funding Support

Ethical approval: As nil direct patient or patient contact was not involved, so ethical approval was not taken.

References

1. WHO Emergencies preparedness, response- Disease Outbreak News: Pneumonia of unknown cause – China 2020; Published on 5th Jan 2020; accessed

- on 1st June 2020, available at: <https://www.who.int/csr/don/05-january-2020-pneumonia-of-unknown-cause-china/en/>
2. World Health Organization (WHO). Geneva; WHO Director-General's statement on IHR Emergency Committee on Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV); 2020. Published on 30th Jan 2020; accessed on 1st June 2020, Available at < [https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-statement-on-ihr-emergency-committee-on-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)](https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-statement-on-ihr-emergency-committee-on-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov)) />
 3. World Health Organization Geneva: WHO; 2005, International Health Regulations (2005) Second edition. Published on 2005, reprinted 2008; accessed on 1st June 2020; Available at<<http://www.who.int/ihr/publications/9789241596664/en/>>
 4. European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). Stockholm: ECDC; 2020,Risk assessment: Outbreak of acute respiratory syndrome associated with a novel coronavirus, China: first local transmission in the EU/EEA-Third update; Published on 31 January 2020; accessed on first June 2020. Available at <<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/publications-data/risk-assessment-outbreak-acute-respiratory-syndrome-associated-novel-1>>
 5. WHO: Q&A: Tips for health and safety at the workplace in the context of COVID-19, Getting your workplace ready for COVID-19; Published on 3rd March 2020 ; accessed on first June 2020; Available at<https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-tips-for-health-and-safety-at-the-workplace-in-the-context-of-covid-19?gclid=Cj0KCQjw6uT4BRD5ARIsADwJQ19TTEu5xq873yPmfFuFIkEq3vszY4uDdz34BKCu9YSxvJ81DI2Mx9AaAiwQEALw_wcB>
 6. Chandrashekar Srinivasan ,Home ministry: Coronavirus Social distancing guidelines: Annexure I- National Directive COVID management, SOP For Social Distancing In Offices, Factories In Lockdown Guidelines; Guidelines for Lockdown: Guidelines on limiting physical contact, meant to halt the spread of the novel coronavirus, come a day after Prime Minister Modi extended lockdown to May 3; (with inputs from ANI), Updated: April 15, 2020; accessed on 5th June 2020, Available at< <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-social-distancing-guidelines-home-ministry-covid-19-social-distancing-checklist-for-off-2212045>>
 7. Ministry of home affairs Order: Guidelines for Phased reopening (Unlock 1),Ministry of home affairs Order no- 40-3/2020, Dated 30th May 2020, Published on 1st June and Accessed on 13th July 2020available at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAOrderDt_30052020.pdf >
 8. Guidelines on preventive measures to contain spread of COVID-19 in workplace Settings; Government of India, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare Directorate General of Health Services (EMR Division), Published on 18th May 2020, Accessed on first June 2020; Available at: <[https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/ Guidelineson preventivemeasure stocontainspreadofCOVID19inworkplacesettings. pdf](https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/GuidelinesonpreventivemeasurestocontainspreadofCOVID19inworkplacesettings.pdf)>,
 9. CDC: National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases; Interim Guidance for Businesses and Employers Responding to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), May 2020; Plan, Prepare and Respond to Coronavirus Disease 2019, Updated on 6th May 2020; Accessed on first June 2020, Content source: National Centre for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases (NCIRD), Division of Viral Diseases, Available at <<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/guidance-business-response.html>>
 10. Times of India: Back to work precautions: The do's and don'ts of resuming work in the coronavirus pandemic, Times of India. Com, Published on Jun 4, 2020, Accessed on 7th July 2020, available at <<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/health-fitness/health-news/back-to-work-precautions-the-dos-and-donts-of-resuming-work-in-the-coronavirus-pandemic/photostory/76195565.cms>>
 11. Financial express: Coronavirus lockdown: Companies cautiously resume work as India begins reopening economy, Published on May 12, 2020 accessed on 5th July 2020, Available at < <https://www.financialexpress.com/economy/coronavirus-lockdown-companies-cautiously-resume-work-as-india-begins-reopening-economy/1956620/>>
 12. BBC news India: Coronavirus: How India's lockdown sparked a debate over maids, Coronavirus Pandemics, Published on May 6, 2020, Accessed on 1st July,2020, Available at <<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-5566620>>

com/news/world-asia-india-52529922>

13. Indian NEWS, Hindustan Times: Government offices outside COVID hot spots to resume work, Coronavirus Outbreak, Published on April 19, 2020, Accessed on 1st June,2020 available at < <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/govt-offices-outside-covid-hot-spots-to-resume-work/story-Ee4OefbHaPCahtnaovBulJ.html>>
14. Sadaf Modak, Omkar Gokhale, Maharashtra courts to resume work but challenges remain: Access to virtual hearing & lack of infrastructure, The Indian Express, Published on June 8, 2020, accessed on 15th June 2020, available at < <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/maharashtra-courts-to-resume-work-but-challenges-remain-access-to-virtual-hearing-lack-of-infrastructure/>>
15. Rahul Shrivastava, Ministries to resume work, relief for industries, farmers: Exclusive details on extension of Covid-19 lockdown, India Today, Published on April 11, 2020, accessed on 1st June 2020 available at< <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/ministries-to-resume-work-relief-for-industries-farmers-exclusive-details-on-extension-of-covid-19-lockdown-1665927-2020-04-11>>,
16. Priya Justin, India extends lockdown until 3 May; may allow some factories to resume ops; independent Commodity of Intelligence services, Published on April 14,2020; Accessed on 1st June 2020, Available at < <https://www.icis.com/explore/resources/news/2020/04/14/10495755/india-extends-lockdown-until-3-may-may-allow-some-factories-to-resume-ops>>
17. Aftab Ahmed, Reuters, India plans to resume some manufacturing amid lockdown, Business News, Published on April 13,2020 Accessed at 15th June, Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-industries/india-plans-to-resume-some-manufacturing-amid-lockdown-sources-idUSKCN21V089>>