

Life, liberty or the pursuit of happiness in a post-Covid 19 era

The oft-repeated phrase 'Life or Livelihood?' is a false choice; one without the other is unimaginable. A . . . study has found that re-opening the US economy might have saved 15 million jobs at an unbearable cost of an additional 80,000 lives in two months.

By Aurobindo Ghosh, Amit Haldar and Kalyan Bhaumik

WITHOUT a proven therapy or vaccine, re-opening businesses is a deliberate decision. Prolonged nation-wide lockdowns could decimate small businesses affecting youth, women and marginalised communities inordinately. However, re-opening prematurely could lead to a surge of infections, or subsequent waves overwhelming healthcare facilities.

The oft-repeated phrase "Life or Livelihood?" is a false choice; one without the other is unimaginable. Nevertheless, from a University of Pennsylvania simulation study, fully re-opening the US economy might have saved 15 million jobs at an unbearable cost of an additional 80,000 lives in two months.

Unsurprisingly, from a DBS-SKBI SInDEX survey, 80 per cent of Singaporeans preferred saving lives at short-term economic costs; only 8.6 per cent preferred protecting health at all costs. Strategically, policy-makers should mitigate loss of life by containing leading indicators like test positivity rate to below 5 per cent or lagging indicators like Reproduction Factor (R) to below one. Thereafter, minimise psychosocial trauma and cautiously reopen the economy.

Imagine if data were ubiquitous in 1918, the global death toll in the Spanish Flu outbreak would not be a staggering 50 million with 500 million infections, many in subsequent waves.

Serologic tests that detect antibodies developed through prior infection of Covid-19, indicating possible community-wide or herd immunity, are becoming more popular. Studies show that between 35 per cent and 80 per cent of infections might be asymptomatic, necessitating universal testing.

In the early stages (that is, the first two weeks) the standard RT-PCR test may be more sensitive. It is when antibodies start appearing at the end of the first week. A recently published research study shows RT-PCR and serological tests might complement each other. Hence, a more comprehensive testing regimen is required to attenuate potential false positives and negatives.

As more people re-start their routine work life together, contact tracing and isolation of infected patients for targeted response is critical. Policy-makers hope individuals will trust and adopt mobile apps widely so that the disease can be contained.

The most consequential effects of coronavirus are the lives lost to the contagion and the eco-

nomy dislocated by the lockdown, but its most manifest effect is arguably the mildly adverse psychological reaction of most people to enforced social isolation within the confines of their homes. Many millions are compelled to embrace temporarily an existence of uncertainty and immobility, and thus one of anxiety and boredom. Against this background of a worldwide public health crisis, countless individual households afflicted with marital discord are undergoing their own unique personal crises.

As Leo Tolstoy foretells in his novel *Anna Karenina*, "each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way", each marriage breakdown has its own tragic narrative.

MARITAL TENSIONS WORSEN

One may assume that the various concurrent, novel stressors of life during this pandemic have combined to exacerbate marital tensions and dysfunction. During home confinement in the lockdown, some relationships crumble sooner than expected, even resulting in domestic violence.

But anecdotally, in more cases than not, the opposite is true in that the quality of marriage has actually improved a little, since episodes of spousal conflict become less frequent and less intense,

though the underlying issues of conflict may have been unresolved. The quarantine has afforded people the opportunity to become a bit more self-aware of their own biases and triggers, preferences and habits.

We end with a tale of hope in an amazing race for a box of chocolates. Invited to race, a group of children held each other's hands and walked slowly to the finish line to share the bounty.

Responding to a curious social scientist, a little girl participant responded: "How can I be happy when my friends are unhappy?" This concept of *ubuntu* (a Zulu/Xhosa term meaning "I am because we are") resonates in social-distancing and wearing face masks to protect others.

Be it the participants in the fictional race or the real 15-year-old girl who transported her disabled father home on a bicycle in a 1,200-km journey during India's nation-wide lockdown, we find ourselves in the best of times, in the worst of times, right out of the Dickensian novel.

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