



## Science REPORTER

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## A Virus-given Opportunity

**D**uring the past four months, as the SARS-CoV-2 virus continued its rampaging run through most parts of the world infecting millions and causing fatalities in the lakhs, health and healthcare have come into sharper focus and come to occupy the highest pedestal like never before.

Lockdowns have largely been complied with. While the concern for one's health and life led many to willingly lock themselves up inside the safe confines of their homes, those that moved around either did not quite fathom the impact of the deadly and highly contagious virus or had perforce to move out to earn to survive.

The coronavirus pandemic also ensured a rare focus on and high public trust in scientists and public health experts. For the first time news about a virus and the disease it caused, the various steps required to stay safe, as also the interest in ongoing medical research in the development of new drugs and vaccines made it to the front pages of newspapers and played out on prime time news. Health and medical experts have been hot property. Perhaps for the first time, health news has pushed politics and crime into the background.

A miniscule entity has forced everyone to be more vigilant of individual health and immunity. With the world transforming into a global village with enhanced travel and business, industrial processes and environmental depredations leading to pollution and climate changes, the expanding human footprint increasingly encroaching into the domains of wild animals and the unregulated trade in wild animals, the current pandemic is a scenario that threatens to repeat itself ever too often in the future.

Experts from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) have warned, "Future pandemics are likely to be more frequent, spread more rapidly, kill more people and inflict even worse economic damage if humanity fails to fundamentally change how it is damaging the environment and exploiting wildlife." They say that as many as 1.7 million unidentified viruses of the type known to infect people are believed to still exist in mammals and water birds. Anyone of these could potentially be even more disruptive and lethal than COVID-19.

Therefore, while it is imperative to seize upon this opportunity to forge ahead with scientifically informed preventive health measures, it is equally important to reflect upon and strengthen the medical infrastructure in the country to prepare well for the next medical and health crisis.

There is a critical need to augment the number of doctors and health workers as well as health facilities, medical colleges, nursing schools and also training for medical technicians. There is a need to focus on developing indigenous capacities in a range of contexts – from testing facilities to cheaper and effective diagnostics, from medical equipment to protective equipment for health workers, from the development of drugs and vaccines to genomic sequencing.

We have been sufficiently forewarned. During the next health crisis, we should not be left holding on to the same excuses.

Hasan Jawaid Khan

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