

VOLUME 39, NUMBER 12

December 2022

ISSN 0189 - 160X

WAJM

WEST AFRICAN JOURNAL OF MEDICINE

ORIGINALITY AND EXCELLENCE IN MEDICINE AND SURGERY



OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF
THE WEST AFRICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS *AND*
WEST AFRICAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS



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REVIEW ARTICLE

Health and Wellbeing amidst a Prolonged Pandemic: Implications for Physicians and Patients

Santé et Bien-Être dans le Cadre d'une Pandémie Prolongée : Implications pour les Médecins et les Patients

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ABSTRACT

Health is wealth, so goes the popular maxim. The 46th West African College of Physicians Annual General and Scientific Meeting focuses on Health and Wellbeing Amidst a Prolonged Pandemic. Health and wellbeing are closely related components critical to healthy living and cannot be considered independent of each other. While health is a state of total wellbeing; wellbeing is intricately linked with happiness and satisfaction in life. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the health and well-being of nations all over the world. In the wake of the pandemic came the COVID-19 recession which brought a crash in the global economy, reduction in productivity, rise in unemployment, massive layoffs, collapse of businesses and manufacturing industries, disruptions in transportation and much more. These harsh economic realities have placed a huge strain on global mental health resulting in physical, mental and social disorders. The workload of the average physician and other health care workers increased tremendously resulting in burnout and psychological stress with a consequent increase in the incidence of psychological disorders including anxiety, depression, suicide and suicidal ideation amongst others. The lack of preparedness for the pandemic and the inequality in strength of healthcare systems across the world prolonged the pandemic and its adverse consequences on health and well-being of the populace. Promotion of health and well-being of health care professionals and the populace at large is essential for the growth of any economy and is an essential consideration for stakeholders involved in disease prevention and health promotion. **WAJM 2022; 39(12): 1312–1315.**

Keywords: Health, Well-being, COVID-19 pandemic, Mental health, Disease prevention.

RÉSUMÉ

La santé est une richesse, dit la maxime populaire. La 46^e réunion générale annuelle et scientifique du Collège des médecins d'Afrique de l'Ouest a pour thème la santé et le bien-être dans un contexte de pandémie prolongée. La santé et le bien-être sont des éléments étroitement liés et essentiels à une vie saine et ne peuvent être considérés comme indépendants l'un de l'autre. Alors que la santé est un état de bien-être total, le bien-être est intimement lié au bonheur et à la satisfaction dans la vie. La pandémie de COVID-19 a eu un impact considérable sur la santé et le bien-être des nations du monde entier. Dans le sillage de la pandémie, la récession du COVID-19 a entraîné un effondrement de l'économie mondiale, une réduction de la productivité, une hausse du chômage, des licenciements massifs, l'effondrement des entreprises et des industries manufacturières, des perturbations dans les transports, etc. Ces dures réalités économiques ont exercé une pression énorme sur la santé mentale mondiale, entraînant des troubles physiques, mentaux et sociaux. La charge de travail du médecin moyen et des autres travailleurs de la santé a considérablement augmenté, entraînant un épuisement professionnel et un stress psychologique, avec pour conséquence une augmentation de l'incidence des troubles psychologiques, dont l'anxiété, la dépression, le suicide et les idées suicidaires, entre autres. Le manque de préparation à la pandémie et l'inégalité des systèmes de santé dans le monde ont prolongé la pandémie et ses conséquences négatives sur la santé et le bien-être de la population. La promotion de la santé et du bien-être des professionnels de la santé et de la population en général est essentielle à la croissance de toute économie et constitue une considération essentielle pour les acteurs impliqués dans la prévention des maladies et la promotion de la santé. **WAJM 2022; 39(12): 1312–1315.**

Mots clés: Santé, Bien-être, Pandémie de COVID-19, Santé mentale, Prévention des maladies.

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INTRODUCTION

Health and wellbeing are intricately linked elements that are essential for good quality of life and enhanced human sustenance. The theme for this year's 46th West African College of Physicians Annual General and Scientific Meeting is quite apt as it explores Health and Wellbeing Amidst a Prolonged Pandemic. Wellbeing is 'the state of being comfortable, healthy, or happy. It reflects an individual's overall state of being and is often specifically associated with mental and psychological health.¹ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 'Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.'² This definition is compatible with the biopsychosocial model of health, which takes into consideration the physiological, psychological and social components of health and illness, and the inter-relatedness of these components.³

It is widely known that health contributes to well-being and wellbeing to health.¹ Well-being is an outcome that indicates a good perception of the living conditions of members of the society.⁴ It describes how one feels about oneself and perceives one's life and expresses the complex interplay of physical, psychological, emotional and social health factors in an individual.⁵ Wellbeing implies a positive rather than neutral state.³ It is strongly associated with happiness and general life satisfaction.⁵

Well-being has been defined "as the combination of feeling good and functioning well; the experience of positive emotions such as happiness and contentment as well as the development of one's potential, having some control over one's life, having a sense of purpose, and experiencing positive relationships."⁶ It is a state that enables individuals or the society to progress and thrive. Well-being is strongly associated with success at personal, interpersonal and professional levels.^{1,7} Persons who are high in well-being manifest substantial productivity at work, greater

creativity, higher learning skills, and have **strong positive relationships.**⁷⁻⁹

Though subjective, wellbeing could be assessed indirectly by measuring socioeconomic and psychological factors such as housing, employment, interpersonal relationships, resilience, social connectedness and productivity.¹⁰ A higher well-being is associated with improved outcomes especially in physical health, vitality, longevity and better performance at work. This results in increased productivity which consequently produces improvement in economic performance of the nation as a whole.¹¹⁻¹³

Well-being has been extensively studied for centuries; however measures for assessing wellbeing vary from study to study.⁶ It "exists in two dimensions, subjective and objective... and comprises an individual's experience of their life as well as a comparison of life circumstances with social norms and values."¹ Assessment of well-being requires an effective tool, that provides insight into pertinent aspects of an individual's life, including how well an individual functions, how satisfied they are with life and what gives them pleasure and happiness.¹

Health and well-being are interconnected as one cannot be properly interpreted without putting the other in perspective. Their importance has been recognised globally and has influenced several national and international policies.¹ A healthy population is likely to acquire knowledge and develop new skills leading to higher income per head. Hence, health and well-being should be protected and promoted to ensure sustainable development of a society.^{1,3}

The emergence of the pandemic in 2020 had a significant negative impact on most social macro and micro-systems, bringing them to an abrupt halt.¹⁴ The COVID-19 recession which began in most countries in February 2020, is the second largest global recession in recent history.¹⁵ There was a rapid stock market crash and a sharp rise in global unemployment rates.^{14,16} These economic

factors are closely linked to health and has resulted in huge physical, mental and social consequences.¹⁶ Mental health was most affected by this surge, as the lack of social stimulation and reduction in social connectivity made individuals less resilient.¹⁷ The dearth of credible information on the disease gave avenue for rumours to abound, further fuelling tension and anxiety.^{17,18}

Furthermore, many companies have had to downsize to ensure sustainability in line with the reality of the lockdown, leading to massive job loss. These further puts a strain on mental health globally.¹⁷ Access to healthcare was also hindered by the mandatory lockdowns as most mental health issues rarely present as emergencies unless they have near-fatal complications. There was also the issue of a low sense of awareness and sensitivity to mental health illness by non-health personnel, although this is rapidly changing in recent times.^{17,18}

The workload of the average physician increased tremendously due to a geometric increase in the number of COVID-19 cases and other respiratory illnesses, coupled with pre-existing chronic and acute illnesses.¹⁹ This increased burnout levels and psychological stress among healthcare professionals, resulting in an increased incidence of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation.^{19,20} Higher levels of anxiety were seen among physicians who had little children as they were more likely to suffer emotional distress from the fear of transmitting the infection to them.²⁰

Perhaps the factor that took the most important toll on health-workers is the death of colleagues. Being the workforce at the fore front, the healthcare industry was most-hit by the impact of the disease on personnel. This had a significant impact on mental health and further worsened burn-out due to reduction in the number of healthcare workers available.¹⁹ The challenge of reducing the spread of infection, and formulating strategies for the control of the infection also proved a great burden to bear for many healthcare workers at

different levels of decision-making. This negatively impacted well-being.²¹

The challenge of effective management of the infection took different forms in various climes. In developing countries, one of the issues was shortage of manpower, in terms of skilled healthcare personnel, and paucity of infrastructure for proper case management.²¹ Many hospitals lacked adequately equipped intensive care units to provide respiratory support and other supportive care for confirmed cases.²¹ In developed countries, shortages of manpower necessitated recruitment of foreign-trained physicians. This shortage was worsened by the vulnerability of healthcare workers to the infection resulting in increased morbidity and mortality, among them.^{20,21} The lack of preparedness for the pandemic and the inequality in strength of healthcare systems across various countries can be said to be perpetuating factors for the prolonged pandemic and its myriad consequences on health and well-being.²²

The impact of the pandemic on affected patients persist long after the infection as many report overwhelming symptoms of muscle weakness, almost paralyzing fatigue, and persistent debilitation, with these conditions lasting for weeks, months, or even longer²³ in what is now known as Long-COVID, thus heightening the effect of this pandemic.^{23,24} The health care system is the major body that deals with the consequences of poor wellbeing. Thus, it is pertinent for the health community to take into cognizance the long-term effects of the disease and to determine how to measure well-being among patients and improve their quality of life.^{23,24}

Measuring, tracking and promoting well-being is essential for the growth of any economy and is useful for stakeholders involved in disease prevention and health promotion.^{4,25} Health and wellbeing must remain our priority as we strive to secure ways of providing optimum care for patients, strengthening weak healthcare systems

via multilateral agreements, support of the healthcare workforce and formulation of better policies that ensure pandemic pre-paredness and improved outcomes.²⁵

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