

Communication during a pandemic

The Department of Biotechnology's Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI), DBT/Wellcome Trust India Alliance (India Alliance), IAVI, and Nature India organised the fourth webinar in the 'COVID-19: Ask the Experts' series on understanding and deconstructing the role that language plays in the context of a pandemic.

A "People's War", "tackling the pandemic on a war footing" and "wartime president" are just a few in what is a long list of war metaphors being frequently used in the media and other places to highlight the impact and scale of the crisis. But is comparing a pandemic to war needed? How does the use of such metaphors influence public understanding of the health crisis and, ultimately, their response to the crisis?

Dr. Soumitra Pathare, a psychiatrist and Director at the Pune-based Center for Mental Health Law and Policy, discussed aspects such as the use of war metaphors for outbreaks, avoidance of stigmatizing language, and communication of uncertainty of the pandemic in the webinar telecast on April 17.



WEBINAR ON
COVID-19
Edited Excerpts

Role of Language during a Pandemic

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Pointing out that hashtags like "Corona Warriors," "Corona fighters," "Corona war" were trending lately, he said they were not new as similar metaphors were used while communicating about cancer and HIV in the past. They might galvanize society to put up with hardship when in a pandemic-like situation. However, some have suggested that better ways of talking about COVID-19 would be to use metaphors drawn from ecology. Pandemics are seen more as a journey, and the response to the pandemic is synonymous to that of an orchestra. A journey requires planning. There'll be some obstacles, and ultimately we will get to the endpoint.

Referring to the issue of anxiety and disquiet faced by many, he said anxiety was a valid emotion in this crisis and there was a need for everyone to work together to find ways to deal with it. The insistence on "social distancing" and usage of the term has been translated to mean that everyone is an island by himself or herself. It is often misunderstood that one has to fight the disease all alone. This

is not right. It's important to make people understand that it only meant that they should be responsible for themselves and that there are people out there to provide help in case it's needed..

On how to talk to elderly, he suggested that rather than merely emphasizing that elderly are at risk because of an increased chance of them contacting COVID-19 since they have underlying co-morbidities, there was a need to have a more practical and focused discussion.. The conversation can rather be about how to mitigate the risks.

Dr. Pathare also urged the need for care while communicating the efforts being taken by scientists to fight the pandemic. People looked for certainties. But, in science, there is a degree of uncertainty about finding solutions, while other people offered certain answers. Religion, for example, tends to offer certainties and answers. There was a need to let people understand how the method of science works, while emphasizing that science is the problem-solver.

He called for efforts to avoid usage of stigmatizing language. For instance, those affected by the disease may be referred to as “persons with COVID19’ instead of as “COVID19 patients”.

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