



## EDİTÖRE MEKTUP / LETTER TO THE EDITOR

### Ensuring safe repatriation of the citizens amidst the threat of Corona Virus Disease 2019 Pandemic

Corona Virüsü Hastalığı 2019 Pandemi tehdidi altında vatandaşların güvenli bir şekilde geri gönderilmesinin sağlanması

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To the Editor,

The ongoing Corona Virus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) outbreak, which started with a cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan city of China has now been detected across 213 nations and territories<sup>1,2</sup>. The disease has already been given the status of a Pandemic and the overall risk of global transmission of the infection has been upgraded to a very high level<sup>1</sup>. The current estimates depict that a cumulative total of 2804796 cases has been reported since the start of the outbreak, and to complicate the issue further, a total of 193710 deaths have been linked to the complications of the novel infection<sup>1</sup>.

Amidst these alarming estimates, there is an immense need to implement measures which can reduce the potential of the transmission of the infection from one person to another and from one nation to another<sup>2,3</sup>. Even in these circumstances, the World Health Organization emphasized that there is no need for travel or trade restrictions, and in case, any such restriction has been imposed, it has to be brief in duration, in proportion to the public health risks and should be periodically reviewed<sup>4</sup>. However, as the disease continues to spread at an alarming pace, despite the implementation of various measures pertaining to case detection, surveillance, isolation, case management, contact tracing, etc., many nations have imposed travel restriction as an approach to reduce the onward transmission<sup>3,4</sup>. Some of the nations have gone one step further and took the call

to bring their nationals from the affected regions with an aim to maintain their health and wellbeing<sup>4</sup>. It is quite obvious that this strategy will pay no dividends, if we fail to strengthen the other essential domains of disease control<sup>2,3</sup>. Before the initiation of the embarkation process, the concerned authorities of both the nations should indulge in bilateral communication, while the aircraft should have adequate stock of personal protective equipment (PPE) and a number of medical & non-medical personnel, who all are well-trained in different modalities of infection prevention & control measures. Exit screening needs to be conducted before departure for the identification of potential suspects, and it is ideal to delay the travel of suspects<sup>4</sup>.

During the journey, the seating location of each person should be earmarked and that will be of utility if a person becomes symptomatic, especially for contact screening<sup>2,4</sup>. In case, suspects of the disease are detected during the journey, all steps should be taken to avoid the exposure to co-passengers or the crew. These measures can range from identification of a specific crew member for the care of the suspect, promotion of the use of appropriate PPE, recording the details (telephone / address) of the contacts, adherence to the respiratory hygiene & hand-hygiene provisions, disinfection of the contaminated surfaces, standard disposal of tissues, etc<sup>3,4</sup>. In addition, the health authorities at the point of arrival has to be informed about the developments and the need for urgent care.

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Once these individuals reach their own nation, a temperature screening at the point of entry combined with display of relevant health information, and collection of details about symptoms, history of exposure and contact particulars should be done<sup>4</sup>. The priority should be given to the suspected cases for their initial assessment in an earmarked separate place and their transit has to be expedited through a separate pathway with the help of a team of trained personnel<sup>4</sup>. For the non-suspect passengers, appropriate health measures and risk communication components need to be strengthened<sup>3</sup>. The aircraft has to be disinfected through the use of appropriate chemicals. All the non-suspect passengers ideally should be quarantined in a health facility for a period of 2 weeks to promote early detection of symptoms and also to simultaneously reduce the probability of further transmission<sup>2,4</sup>. Further, the entire crew of the aircraft should also be monitored for the development of symptoms for the next 14 days<sup>3,4</sup>.

In conclusion, the decision to repatriate nationals to their country of origin is an important step from the public health perspective amidst the imposition of various travel restrictions by different nations. However, in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, we all have to be well prepared for all these tasks and should always have an emergency response plan to effectively contain the infection.

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