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Eid gatherings may have inadvertently precipitated high COVID-19 deaths in the Muslim community

Close social interactions during the period leading up to and including on the Eid day are likely to have inadvertently precipitated high COVID-19 deaths in the Muslim community, according to South Africa's leading medical scientists.

"Deaths from COVID-19 usually lag behind an increase in SARS-CoV-2 infections/mild COVID-19 by approximately two weeks, indicating that the deaths observed during the last three weeks from 20 May to 10 June 2021, likely materialised due to infections that coincided with the last third of the fasting month (Ramadaan) that is observed by Muslims, which culminated in the observation of Eid," the researchers said in a correspondence recently published in the *South African Medical Journal*.

One of the authors, Dr Salim Parker from the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Division of Infectious Diseases and HIV Medicine, noted: "Although reasons for this are multifactorial, it is likely to include higher attendance in places of worship and social gatherings over the Eid celebration period. Notably, no such differences between the trajectory of deaths in the Muslim community relative to national trends was evident in 2020 when all places of worship were restricted from operating."

Parker said analysis of mortality by race group reveals that compared with whites, South Africans of Indian ancestry have a 35% increased risk of dying of COVID-19 when hospitalised, while black Africans and coloured people have a 23-24% higher risk of death following COVID-19 hospitalisation.

"This heightened risk is independent of other underlying risk factors such as diabetes, which is highly prevalent in people of Indian ancestry compared with whites. Compared with all other race groups, South Africans of Indian ancestry have an 11% increased risk of death following COVID-19 hospitalisation," shared Parker.

Muslim community organisations across the country report daily numbers of known COVID-19 deaths to a co-ordinating group known as Muslim Stats South Africa. By 10 June 2021, 2 826 COVID-19 deaths were recorded in the Muslim community, predominantly of Indian/Malay descent, which constitutes 4.9% of 57 474 recorded COVID-19 deaths nationally.

Said Parker: "The proportion of deaths in the Muslim community is disproportionate when considering Muslims represent approximately 1.1 million (1.9%) of SA's 59.6 million population. It is acknowledged that there are limitations with national COVID-19 death reporting – the South African Medical Research Council (SAMRC) reported 166 794 excess natural deaths in SA for the same time period, suggesting that reported COVID-19 deaths are likely underestimated by three-fold across the country."

Comparing weekly Muslim deaths in Gauteng, where the third wave has preceded that in the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape Provinces, the weekly numbers of hospital deaths in Gauteng and excess natural deaths in Gauteng reported by the SAMRC - the sharp and steeply rising increase in deaths among Muslims after Ramadaan is even more evident.

The current weekly number of deaths in the Gauteng Muslim communities has already surpassed the peak weekly deaths reported in the community during the first and second waves.

"These findings provide circumstantial evidence that gatherings at the end of Ramadaan and Eid-ul-Fitr likely led to superspreader events among Muslims in Gauteng, which has resulted in a large number of avoidable deaths. It is unclear whether the SARS-CoV-2 Delta variant (first identified in India) may have contributed to the early outbreak in this community, as the variant is 60% more transmissible and likely more virulent than ancestry SARS-CoV-2," added Parker.

As COVID-19 cases continue to increase, the authors said it is important that adequate mitigation strategies be adopted nationally, including in the Muslim and other religious communities, to avoid further preventable COVID-19 deaths.

"Public health and social measures to limit transmission, such as mask-wearing, physical distancing and hand-sanitising are important. Notably, superspreader events are directly or indirectly responsible for 80% of SARS-CoV-2 infection. Such superspreader events can occur owing to gatherings of even a few people in poorly ventilated indoor spaces, particularly in the absence of face mask-wearing, including when socialising," Parker said.

The Muslim Festival of Sacrifice, Eid al-Adha, will take place on 21 July 2021. The gatherings are part of the celebrations but need to be avoided.

Additionally, gatherings centred around the ritual slaughter of sheep, which is part of this Eid, even if held outdoors, have the potential to be superspreading events, and also need to be reconsidered in this time of crisis.

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