

Psychological impacts of a potential monkeypox virus outbreak and lessons learned from COVID-19

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Dear Editor-in-Chief,

A new threat looms on the horizon as the world emerges from the profound challenges of the COVID 19 pandemic: monkeypox. Monkeypox, a zoonotic Orthopoxvirus closely related to the virus that causes smallpox, is traditionally endemic in certain regions of central and western Africa (Bunge et al., 2022). However, recent outbreaks in non-endemic countries have raised global concern. The World Health Organization (WHO) has declared the monkeypox outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (WHO, 2024). This declaration underscores the urgent need for preparedness, not only to deal with the physical health effects of the virus, but also to address the potential psychological consequences of a widespread outbreak. A potential monkeypox pandemic could result in significant mental health challenges that would mirror or even exacerbate the psychiatric effects that were observed during the COVID 19 pandemic (Bilginer et al., 2021).

The COVID 19 pandemic has dramatically changed the landscape of mental health care, in particular through the rapid expansion of telepsychiatry. Traditional face-to-face mental health services became increasingly inaccessible as physical distance measures were enforced worldwide. Mental health professionals have responded and adopted telepsychiatry as their primary modality. This shift not only ensured continuity of care, but also provided new opportunities to reach patients in remote or underserved areas. As a result, many mental health professionals have gained a great deal of experience in providing care through digital platforms and have learned to navigate the unique challenges and benefits of this medium (Jakovljević, 2020; Sinha et al., 2024). This experience will be invaluable in our preparations for the potential mental health demands of a monkeypox outbreak. Telepsychiatry may again play an important role in providing timely assistance, especially in cases where physical isolation is necessary to contain the proliferation of the virus.

The psychological impact of a potential monkeypox outbreak, however, is not limited to the logistical challenges of providing health care. A significant source of anxiety for the general population can be the constant flow of pandemic-related news. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the constant flow

of information – often fraught with uncertainty – contributed to a heightened level of stress, fear and misinformation (Jakovljević, 2021). In the context of a monkeypox outbreak, these fears could be exacerbated by the public's unfamiliarity with the virus and the disturbing images associated with its symptoms. While it is important to stay informed, it is also important to be cautious about news consumption and to prioritise reliable sources, such as WHO recommendations. Mental health services must also prioritise preventive measures, emphasising the importance of mental health literacy. Equipping the public with knowledge about stress management and early recognition of anxiety and depression can reduce the overall psychological burden of an outbreak.

To conclude, the potential threat of monkeypox outbreaks highlights the urgent need for comprehensive mental health strategies. Lessons from COVID-19, particularly the value of telepsychiatry, provide a solid foundation for responding to future public health emergencies. Mental health professionals must continue to innovate and adapt, ensuring that mental health services are accessible, effective and responsive to evolving needs. Improving mental health literacy and promoting informed, cautious news consumption can also help mitigate the psychological impact of such outbreaks. By integrating these approaches into public health strategies, we can better protect individual and community mental health in the face of emerging infectious diseases.

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