

Ramadan Fasting and COVID-19 Testing: Lessons learnt from 2020

Ayuno de Ramadán y pruebas covid-19: Lecciones aprendidas de 2020

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International Journal of Medical and Surgical Sciences

Universidad Autónoma de Chile, Chile

ISSN: 0719-3904

ISSN-e: 0719-532X

Periodicity: Trimestral

vol. 8, no. 2, 2021

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Received: 16 March 2021

Accepted: 23 March 2021

URL: <http://portal.amelica.org/amelica/jatsRepo/478/4782054001/index.html>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32457/ijmss.v8i2.1503>

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How to Cite: Gondode, P., Sawatkar, G., Kamal, F., Raipure, A. & Dabhekar, S. 2021. Ayuno de Ramadán y pruebas de COVID-19: lecciones aprendidas de 2020: pandemia versus fe.

LETTER

We would like to share our experience encountered in nasopharyngeal sample collection process in a quarantine centre during Ramadan fasting. The challenges faced, ethical conundrum and probable solutions.

For COVID-19 diagnosis, naso-and/or oropharynx swabs (NOS) are preferred clinical samples, involves inserting a minitip swab with a flexible shaft via nostril up to the nasopharynx. Swab is left in place for several seconds to absorb secretions and then slowly removed. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). During this process chances are that saliva and oro-pharyngeal secretions generated, being get swallowed by the subject.

When our team of health care workers (HCW) visited a quarantine centre, for collecting NOS for Covid-19 testing during Ramadan fasting, few people were apprehensive and reluctant for the sample collection procedure. Sceptical that a swab being inserted in nose and throat, may break their fasting (Rozah), compromising their practise in faith. Rozah involves strict abstinence from any form of food and water, wherein even swallowing saliva is considered a breach.

The onerous moral dilemma that the people experienced, trying to weigh their social responsibilities against their religious traditions was unprecedented. As much as they intended to not be a hindrance in playing their parts to control the pandemic, they have been devout adherents of their religious practices. The conundrum was as arduous for the HCW. Faith and religion are extremely personal choices and a basic human right. As much as we respect that, the importance of early testing in an ongoing pandemic couldn't be undermined.

Our suggestions:

- Public can be made aware of the fatwas issued by the religious bodies, that testing won't break the fast. (Khaleej Times, 2020 Apr 21; Times Now Digital. 2020 April 28) Aid of local religious teacher can be considered, to disseminate the information.

- Few minutes spent in explaining the importance of early testing, can be of vital value.

- If some people are still trepidatious, sample collection may be considered at evening, when the fast is over. This will invite more compliance. Also, by doing this the problem of dry mucus membranes during fasting can be obviated.

- The option of saliva testing should be explored, as suggested by recent studies, and goes well with people who are fasting (To KK et al., 2020)

Our suggestions can help henceforth, to strike a balance between protecting human rights, respecting religious sentiments and assuring better compliance with the testing, with a boost in trust towards the administrative policies.

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