Face masks and reducing health inequalities

Dear Editor

Trisha Greenhalgh and colleagues present a pragmatic argument for face mask use by the public in response to COVID-19. [1] Their precautionary principle model in the absence of clear evidence invokes the parachute approach to evidence-based medicine. [2] To extend that analogy, while trialling parachutes seems redundant, considerations such as quality control, 'user' training and ultimately reach remain relevant. To implement guidance from the CDC and others at scale, how it may work to benefit some but not others needs consideration. [3]

The health impact of COVID-19 and living under social distancing will be experienced differently within populations. For example, manual key workers, those unable to work from home or those who fear for their jobs will have increased exposure. Social distancing works better for some than others. [4] Levels of risk factors will sharply differ across social gradients. [5] Whilst the pandemic may affect all communities, some will be more affected than others.

In general, engagement with health promotion messages will also vary along socio-demographic lines and levels of health literacy. [6] Currently promoted health behaviours such as hand washing will mirror such generic differences. In a survey in Hong Kong fifteen years after the SARS outbreak, higher education level and lower age predicted hand hygiene behaviour. [7] Also in Hong Kong, female gender and higher-level education predicted hand hygiene knowledge and behaviour. [8] Individuals and communities will respond more and less effectively when presented with health promoting guidance.

Rapid action is necessary but it is also possible that key messages will unintentionally re-enforce health inequality. A policy promoting face masks for the public seems desirable in the absence of clear harms. Nevertheless, care should be exercised to ensure that variable uptake does not re-enforce existing health inequalities and perpetuate Julian Tudor Hart's Inverse Care Law. [9]

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