

Wearing Masks and Face Covers as Social Responsibility during COVID-19 pandemic

*Statement of the World Emergency COVID19 Pandemic Ethics (WeCope) Committee
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As experts in many fields, coming from many cultures and nations across the world, we declare that the scientific evidence is clear that there is an expected advantage to both individuals and those around them to wear proper face covers including masks in public during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic and pandemic, a number of medical professionals, medical authorities, governments and the World Health Organization (WHO), have stated the lack of advantages of wearing masks, and opposed wearing them, or even claimed to those persons who wanted to wear masks that there is a risk of using them due to what they see as general inappropriate use and/or providing a false feeling of safety. Unfortunately, in only a few countries mask use was encouraged by the governments, despite long standing evidence of their effectiveness (e.g. Jefferson et al., 2001; Wu et al., 2004).

There appear to have been two common reasons for opposing mask use. One is a genuine ignorance of their effectiveness, and another is fear in many countries that there were insufficient masks for medical staff. Whatever the reasons, communication often was flawed, contradictory, unscientific, and/or deceiving, likely causing harm through increased numbers who were infected. This also has resulted in loss of public trust in health leadership and management in some places, at a time when trust is critical.

Although by April 2020 most authorities have changed their advice to actively recommend or even compel citizens to wear face coverings and masks when in public, the questions over failed public moral responsibility and the accountability for this erroneous advice should be looked at as a lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic. While some authorities order all persons to wear masks in public because of the social advantages, in case where there are limited supplies, or affordability, other face coverings may still protect against transmission. Also we do not agree with fines or penalties against persons who do not wear masks in public spaces, but encourage honest communication and education.

The Precautionary Principle is widely recognized in international law, yet it was generally not applied well during the COVID-19 crisis. Many people thought that they should wear masks and we applaud their informed choice, as well as the advices of some governments to wear masks, and even efforts to distribute masks to the public. Article 4 of the Universal Declaration on Bioethics and Human Rights states that human beings have both autonomy and responsibility and that these should be balanced. We also still urge all in positions of authority, at least not to discourage mask use by concerned persons, for any political, cultural, racial, economic or other reasons.

It has been quite a contrast to look at the policies announced in different countries over whether people should wear masks to protect themselves, and/or others from infection during the time of COVID-19 (Macer, 2020). This is a very simple example to illustrate the evolution of individual responsibility and group solidarity, although it is related to rather diverse cultural traditions around the world. We urge governments to be transparent in their assessment of the epidemiological analysis, statistics and truthful in their public communication to uncover the scale of damage caused by any erroneous advice to citizens who wanted to wear masks, but did not wear masks because of inappropriate guidance from the health authorities.

In a world where authorities ought to be representatives of the people they serve, and a reference for the informed choices that people make, truth, transparency and inclusion in partnership with civil society are essential, and the respect for social responsibility is the ethical imperative.

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