

## **Lancet Correspondence (580 words)**

### **In response to:**

Memish ZA et al, No time for dilemma: mass gatherings must be suspended. Lancet March 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020 [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30754-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30754-6)

Memish and colleagues (Ref 1) in their irrational response to our Comment (Ref 2), perceive conflict between the current best risk management practice advice on social distancing and the consideration of cancellation of mass gathering events arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. Memish et al need to reflect on the fact that after the emergence in 2012 in Saudi Arabia of the novel Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus MERS-CoV (Ref 3), which: has a fatality rate 10-15 times greater than COVID-19, and has spread globally; has major epidemic potential (as illustrated by the MERS-CoV outbreak in South Korea (Ref 4) from a single traveller returning from Saudi Arabia), and which remains on the WHO Blueprint List of priority pathogens, we never advocated cancelling the annual Hajj pilgrimage! This was because we adopted a risk-based approach that concluded that the risks were manageable in the context of the mitigation measures that the Saudi Arabia was prepared to put in place. It's been seven years of safe and successful Hajj since MERS-CoV first emerged and this illustrates that the decision was correct. We have not yet seen what decisions might be made by the Saudi government about the impending Hajj in 2020/1441H in the context of COVID-19 but we would urge that those decisions are made on the basis of an evidence-based risk assessment process such as we set out in our article.

Indeed, in the current COVID-19 pandemic situation it is inevitable in many countries that the outcome of the risk assessment on a mass gathering will be to decide not to go ahead or postpone either because the risk is too great, or because the capacity for mitigation measures is not available, or both. That is an appropriate and valid use of a risk assessment tool. The evidence base for mass gathering health is still evolving and needs to be expanded and risk assessment refined further. Fundamental to preventing global spread of infectious diseases from MG events and protecting global health security is considering public health decisions based on evidence and constituting an agreed rational framework for decision-making. It is thus inherent in any risk assessment and risk management framework that the end result of the assessment is taken into account by the end user after careful consideration, as was the recent

decision to postpone the 2020 Olympic Games by Japanese government after weeks of deliberations (Ref 5). Going through a systematic process to assess the event in the specific context of COVID-19 encourages us to consider explicitly the reasoning behind the decision, what it is that we expect the decision to achieve, and what evidence exists to support that reasoning. This in turn helps us evaluate whether the decision achieves what is expected and so informs future decisions. It also requires consideration of the negative impacts of a decision to cancel - on people's jobs, on their mental health, and on the economy - and to look for ways to mitigate the adverse effects.

It is also important that we look to the future. Whatever the course of the COVID-19 pandemic we will get to the point where countries, individually and collectively, will want to start to remove the restrictions in place and start to rebuild communities and economies. This will include decisions on re-starting MGs. These decisions will need to be carefully reviewed and phased to ensure that we do not re-ignite the COVID-19 pandemic and we would advocate our risk-based approach as a sensible and rational way forward to consider those decisions.

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