Potential psychological effects of quarantine

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Many countries are using quarantine in the management of COVID-19; but like any intervention, successful or unsuccessful, this comes with risks. One case history illustrates just what can go wrong – a hospital in Taiwan was suddenly cordoned off, with all the staff, patients and visitors trapped inside, with little food, drink or medical supplies. To add insult to injury, all lines of communication were also blocked. The results were little short of catastrophic, and it is reported that two people committed suicide during the episode. That was an exception, but it illustrates why if quarantine is to be used, it must be done in a way that minimizes adverse consequences.

Here we talk about the possible mental health consequences of quarantine. We reviewed existing literature (Brooks et al., 2020) and found 24 studies, mostly concerned with SARS, Swine Flu and Ebola, of which 23 found a link between quarantine and adverse psychological impacts.

Not surprisingly, there was an increase in common mental disorders (anxiety, depression and so on), compared to expected levels in the general population. Sadly, these were not always short-lived. For example, a study of hospital employees quarantined in China during the SARS outbreak found that quarantine predicted alcohol dependence three years later (Wu et al., 2008). Other issues associated with quarantine and linked with mental health problems included economic loss, particularly in those with lower incomes; confusion due to lack of clear guidelines from officials; and stigma from others. An inability to contact family and friends was associated with an increase in anxiety (Jeong et al., 2016) – so having a working mobile phone is a necessity and those stepping off a long flight or coach journey to enter quarantine will probably welcome a charger or adapter more than anything else.

Study after study reports the malign effect of not being told what is going on. People must know how many days quarantine is likely to last, and this should not be extended without very good reason; evidence highlights the detrimental impact of violating this (Rona et al., 2007). Clear communication from public health officials is necessary, so people understand why they’re being quarantined, and continuous support from health professionals (such as a dedicated helpline) would be useful so they know what to do if they have any symptoms.
Quarantine is going to be difficult, especially as an epidemic progresses. It has emotional consequences, such as frustration or boredom, and anxiety about becoming ill and/or infecting others. But the good news is that many of the things that are associated with psychological distress can be reduced, although probably not eliminated.

References

