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REVIEW

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE EXPATRIATE COMMUNITIES IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a major concern worldwide, especially for migrant workers who are facing unprecedented hardships in all regions. However, there is limited research on how this vulnerable demographic group has coped with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this narrative review was conducted to highlight the issues expatriates are facing during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the people living in Saudi Arabia. Some of the practices to combat the COVID-19 pandemic include providing timely health communications, providing equitable health services to all foreign workers, electronically tracking the health status of citizens and residents, and improving the living conditions of migrant workers, and maintaining an uninterrupted supply of food, implementation of economic reforms in the labor sector, effective border closures and travel restrictions, and regulation of social and religious gatherings. This study also proposes some recommendations to ensure the safety, health and well-being of expatriate communities around the world in pandemic situations.

Résumé

COVID-19 et ses implications pour les communautés expatriées en Arabie Saoudite

La pandémie de maladie à coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) est une préoccupation majeure dans le monde, en particulier pour les travailleurs migrants qui sont confrontés à des difficultés sans précédent dans toutes les régions. Cependant, il existe peu de recherches sur la façon dont ce groupe démographique vulnérable a fait face aux défis de la pandémie de COVID-19. Par conséquent, cet examen narratif a été réalisé pour mettre en évidence les problèmes auxquels les expatriés sont confrontés pendant la pandémie de COVID-19, avec un accent particulier sur les personnes vivant en Arabie saoudite. Certaines des pratiques de lutte contre la pandémie de COVID-19 comprennent la fourniture de communications sanitaires en temps opportun, la fourniture de services de santé équitables à tous les travailleurs étrangers, le suivi électronique de l'état de santé des citoyens et des résidents, l'amélioration des conditions de vie des travailleurs migrants et le maintien d'un approvisionnement ininterrompu. alimentaire, la mise en œuvre

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de réformes économiques dans le secteur du travail, la fermeture effective des frontières et les restrictions de voyage, et la réglementation des rassemblements sociaux et religieux. Cette étude propose également quelques recommandations pour assurer la sécurité, la santé et le bien-être des communautés expatriées à travers le monde en situation de pandémie.

Mots-clés: COVID-19, santé, expatriés, migrants, santé équitable, Arabie Saoudite.

Introduction

During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the international migrant workers, among other populations, appear to be one of the most vulnerable groups in terms of psychological endurance and healthcare access[1-2] and have, therefore, emerged as one of the priority areas for the global community[3-4]. The unequal effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on different ethnic groups may be attributed to a combination of various economic, social and health related factors [5]. Despite their significant contributions to the economy, immigrants[6] and workers in low wage occupations[7] are amongst the most hit target groups during the pandemic. In response to these vulnerabilities, many researchers have called for inclusion of migrants and refugees in the COVID-19 response [8-9].

Migrant communities are predisposed to various risk factors including "high risk occupations, overcrowded accommodations, and barriers to healthcare including inadequate information, language barriers, and reduced entitlement"[10]. The migrant workers in many cases might be working in environments which are more likely to have a high transmission rate[11]. In addition to exposure to the virus, the migrant workers can also suffer from "negative emotions and feelings like loneliness, tension, frustration, low mood, irritability, fear of death, and social isolation"[12]. The COVID-19 pandemic has also instigated racial discriminations against minority groups[13].

Moreover, the pandemic may not only affect minority ethnic groups based on exposure and health risks but also through exposure to loss of income[5]. It has put a monetary strain on migrant workers especially those who rely on daily or monthly wages for survival [11]. Due to a greater financial uncertainty and lack of social support network, the factors affecting the psychological wellbeing of people during COVID-19 could have a greater impact on foreign workers, especially when their country of origin has been severely impacted by the pandemic[14]. Unfortunately, the ramifications of the pandemic are not just confined to the migrant workers only, but also impact their family members and relatives back home because of limited cash flows and remittances[15].

Even though is customary for countries to safeguard its citizens' health and wellbeing under all circumstances, the response towards immigrant workers may not always be equitable and prioritized. The present study was conducted by appraising the literature with the following two-fold objectives: (i) to examine the response of the Government of Saudi Arabia towards COVID-19 and its direct or indirect implications for expatriate communities, and (ii) to suggest suitable and appropriate recommendations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of expatriate communities during the pandemic.

Material and methods

Search Strategy

This study provides a narrative review of the literature on Saudi Arabia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on migrant communities, using electronic databases such as Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, media reports, published government reports, and other relevant content. Literature was selected using the following inclusion criteria: all of the above categories of literature sources published between July 2019 and December 2021, as well as those studies and literature that are either written in English or available in English as a translated version from Arabic. In addition, those works that are not available in English and that were published before or after the period specified in the inclusion criteria were excluded.

Data Extraction

During the review, the publications were screened in two phases in accordance with the principles of conducting a narrative review. In the first phase, the authors independently checked the title and abstract of the incorporated articles and reports

and classified them as related or irrelevant. Then, in the second phase, all related work was only checked for eligibility. The authors used the inclusion and exclusion criteria to shortlist and extract information from eligible articles. The principal author independently assessed all disputes and reached an agreement. Based on the data extracted after the screening process, this review examined Saudi Arabia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically how the Saudi Arabian government has managed the health of its migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eight themes have emerged that describe Saudi Arabia's response towards COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for expatriate communities. These eight themes are as follows (Figure 1):

1. Effective health communication and countering misinformation and disinformation.
2. Equitable healthcare and safety policies for all.
3. E-tracking of the health status of citizens and residents.
4. Improving living and working conditions of migrant workers.
5. Uninterrupted supplies of food, grocery, and items of daily use.
6. Relaxing immigration regulations and economic reforms in the labor sector.
7. Border closures and regulated travel restrictions.
8. Regulated social and religious gatherings.

Saudi Arabia's response towards COVID-19 pandemic and its implications for expatriate communities

According to an estimate of 2018, more than 30% of the Saudi population consisted of expatriates[16]. Generally, migrating to Gulf countries helps immigrants escape from unaffordable expenses back

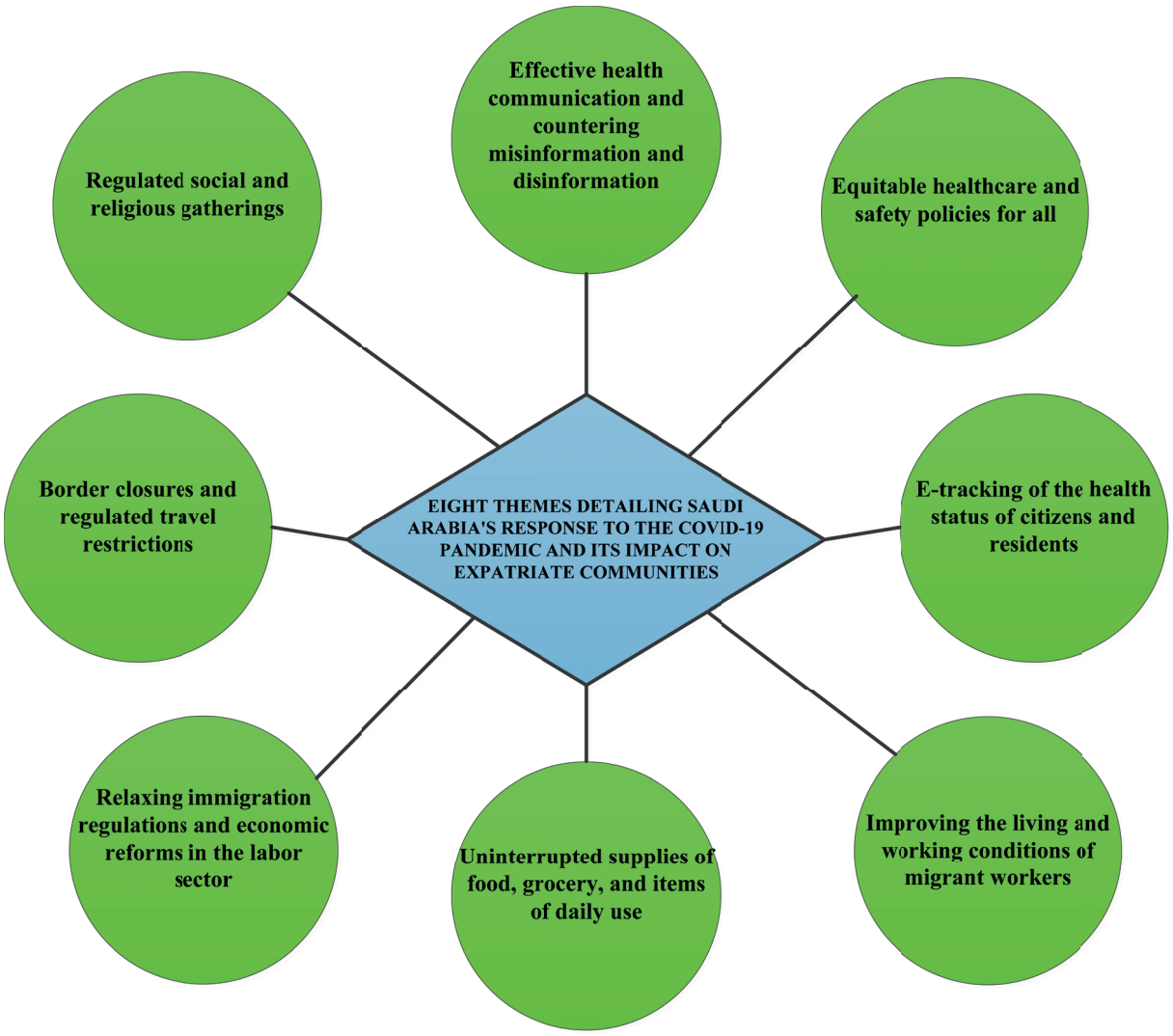


Figure 1. Eight themes detailing Saudi Arabia's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic and its impact on expatriate communities.

home and seek financial stability[17]. Therefore, majority of the expatriate families in Saudi Arabia can better be termed as economic migrants since the primary reason for them moving to the Kingdom is to alleviate their economic conditions and improve their living standards. For these workers and their families, the response by the Government of Saudi Arabia has been tremendously positive since they have been included in the awareness campaigns and mitigating measures including free-of-cost vaccination services.

The Government of Saudi Arabia has been continuously increasing its focus on the health and safety of the visitors and residents in the Kingdom for many years. These efforts include imposing mandatory health insurance for employees, providing integrated and free healthcare coverage and vaccination to pilgrims and visitors, emergency ambulance services, awareness, and educational campaigns as well as mobile applications[16]. Foreseeing the risks and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was quick to develop a well-coordinated and effective collaboration of 24 government agencies to implement and oversee containment measures against the deadly virus[18]. Based on a general review of the existing literature, the authors have listed some of the practices adopted by the Saudi government in combating the COVID-19 pandemic.

Effective health communication and countering misinformation and disinformation

Since the outset of the COVID-19 disease, the Saudi Ministry of Health (MOH) has been stressing on the need for using reliable information from authentic sources and disregarding rumors and false news. To tackle this issue, the Government of Saudi Arabia took swift and meaningful actions. These measures include sharing safety and awareness guidelines in different languages[19], launching media awareness campaigns[18,20] and sending out educational text messages about the COVID-19 prevention tips and guidelines to citizens and residents[21]. The MOH has been actively reaching out to the citizens and residents through various electronic, print, and social media, urging them to use its emergency calling services and virtual clinics [22].

Equitable healthcare and safety policies for all

To fight the spread of infection, it is important that healthcare services are available to migrants irrespective of their legal status in the host countries[23]. Since the onset of the pandemic, the health of migrant communities including illegal occupants has been a priority for the Saudi Government in its response for mitigating the spread [11]. As early as March 2020, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia through a royal decree announced that all patients or suspected cases of COVID-19, whether citizens or residents will be treated free of charge[18,24]. For years, the Government of Saudi Arabia has been tackling with the issue of illegal residents. However, during these testing times, the Government was much lenient even towards those living without valid residence permits and allowed them to seek medical services without having to face any repercussions. Accordingly, the Kingdom announced that free of cost healthcare will be provided in the selected health facilities across Saudi Arabia to all the positive or suspected cases for the disease including violators of residence, labor, or border security laws, without any legal liability[47]. Additionally, the MOH ensured mass testing for early detection of COVID-19[25] and sending healthcare teams to migrant districts[26].

Moreover, the Saudi Food and Drug Authority took swift measures to regulate the sale of masks, sanitizers, medicines, and other medical equipment to ensure a steady and equitable supply and availability[18]. The government also enforced restrictions on selling medical supplies not beyond a reasonable quantity per person. Instead of being overpriced, many stores even provided hand sanitizers and masks through promotional campaigns. Such measures received much satisfaction among expatriate communities within the Kingdom. Many expatriate families felt safer and opted to stay in the Kingdom instead of traveling to their home countries, and various expatriate personnel have even praised the Saudi Government's swift actions and implementation of curtailment measures[27]. This is mainly due to the government's healthcare services and preventive measures to ensure citizens' and residents' safety. Moreover, these measures have helped the Kingdom keep the number of severe cases and fatalities low and decrease the economic burden on the population[28].

Presently, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continues to be among the countries which are recovering faster from the pandemic and has seen a persistent stability and decline in new COVID-19 infections[29]. The Kingdom received its first batch of vaccines on December 16, 2020, where it started registering potential vaccination receivers in with an announcement that the vaccine will be free of charge for all citizens and residents. Following this, the vaccination process was implemented in three stages based on certain priority groups decided by the authorities, which consider citizens and residents alike [30-32]. As of May 30, 2021, the MOH has administered over 13.9 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, contributing to 40% of the Saudi population being vaccinated with at-least one dose[33]. To safeguard the health and wellbeing of

the Saudi citizens and residents, the government has also been implementing strategies for the local visitors and pilgrims wanting to visit the two holy sites as the number of visitors is usually doubled during the month of Ramadan. According to the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, the Government of Saudi Arabia is allowing travel permits to Umrah pilgrims and visitors to the holy sites only if they have fulfilled the criteria of being vaccinated [34-35].

E-tracking of the health status of citizens and residents

Another significant step taken by the MOH was introducing different applications to ensure that the citizens and residents receive access to healthcare services safely. The role and use of mobile telehealth applications have been central to the Kingdom's efforts to control the spread of COVID-19 and keep the growth curve flattened[36]. Freely available for downloads, these applications include Mawid, Tabaud, Tawakkalna and Sehha, facilitating various purposes such as contact tracing, test result reporting and self-assessment, all of which contribute towards curtailing the spread of the disease[37].

Another application called 'Sehhaty' enables users to reach health information and medical e-services provided by different health organizations in the Kingdom[38]. The infection and vaccination status of each individual can be tracked through this application which can be easily installed on smartphones. In order to enter into shopping malls, grocery shops, and office premises, the immune status of each individual is verified at the entry point through this application. On the other hand, the 'Tabaud' application helps notify those who come in contact with people infected with the Coronavirus in their near premises [39]. The application enables the users to receive direct and proactive notifications in case any registered infected person has been detected and to request direct health support from the Saudi Ministry of Health.

Improving living and working conditions of migrant workers

The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed malpractices related to some organizations' workers being subjected to living conditions that were neither permitted nor endorsed by the Government regulations. Workers in these accommodations were over the numbers permissible by the relevant government bodies and were, therefore, at high risk for the uncontrollable spread of the disease. Resultantly, the government of Saudi Arabia had to take effective steps to stem the spread of the COVID-19 by targeting these accommodations. The Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs (MoMRA) issued new health guidelines which required the employing companies to ensure workers' safety by taking strict precautionary measures and following a set of guidelines for constructing or renting out accommodations [40]. This includes identifying and visiting the workers' quarters to disinfect and sterilize them, and temporarily relocating them to the vacated government schools[41]. Limiting the number of people who can be housed together under one roof and establishing committees to monitor and review residential facilities for health care violations[42].

Uninterrupted supplies of food, grocery, and items of daily use

A remarkable accomplishment of the Saudi Government has been to ensure a safe and uninterrupted supply of food and grocery items throughout the pandemic, including the curfew times. This is because quite early on the relevant ministries and government agencies proactively ensured the procurement, production, and availability of basic food commodities within the Kingdom[43]. Even during the most intense periods of lockdowns, when personal visits were either prohibited or allowed for limited periods in a day, delivery systems were running smoothly, and grocery items were available widely including fresh vegetables, fruits, meat, poultry & dairy products as well as other items of daily use including products of personal care and hygiene.

Relaxing immigration regulations and economic reforms in the labor sector

The gulf countries are a major destination for migrant workers from around the world, especially from low or middle-income countries. During the pandemic period, it has become difficult for migrants to carry out immigration-related procedures and administrative requirements for visa applications and renewals, etc[1]. To ease the stress on the expatriate communities, the Government of Saudi Arabia laxed its regulations around the exit and re-entry permits allowing them to cancel or renew them without penalties[28].

The current pandemic may act as a catalyst in reducing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries' dependence on migrant workers[7]. Therefore, finding new jobs or sustaining the existing ones could become extremely difficult for migrant workers under the current circumstances. In a historic bid to improve the quality of life of expatriate workers, the Government of Saudi Arabia has recently abolished a decades-long sponsorship system that will allow foreign workers more freedom to exit and return to the Kingdom, transfer between jobs, improved working conditions, protection of their rights and better housing and entertainment opportunities[44]. Although these measures are not a direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic

and were under consideration as a part of Kingdom's efforts to improve the quality of life for its citizens as well as residents, these changes may certainly help the expatriate workers who have lost or are at risk of losing their current jobs.

Border closures and regulated travel restrictions

Saudi Arabia initially planned to lift the international travel ban on March 31, 2021, but later postponed the decisions to May 17, 2021[45]. These travel restrictions have made it challenging for many expatriates to visit their home countries during the summer season. Even if the travel restrictions do not prevent expatriate workers and families from leaving the Kingdom, the rapidly changing guidelines and regulations put them at risk for not being able to enter once their visit is over. Further, many of those in their home countries cannot return to Saudi Arabia directly and can only do after completing 15 days quarantine in nearby countries. Such a scenario puts an extra burden on the migrant workers both psychologically and economically. However, recent advancements have been promising for expatriate workers in the Kingdom, such as the lift on travel restrictions to particular countries including U.A.E, Germany, the U.S, the U.K, Italy, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, France, and Japan [46]. Another positive news is the availability of the "Tawakkalna" application in 75 countries worldwide which will now function as a health passport for users in these countries[47].

Regulated social and religious gatherings

Each year, many Muslims from around the world travel to the cities of Makkah and Medina for religious observances. However, due to the potential threat of mass transmission of coronavirus, these visits were suspended[18]. The religious gatherings and observances which required physical presence in large numbers were halted and people were required to offer prayers at home. Strict penalties were set in place by the Government of Saudi Arabia for the violators of lockdown restrictions[48]. Although distressing, these were timely and necessary precautions against the spread of the virus. These curtailment measures have been successful in controlling the rate of infection in the Kingdom[28].

After a halt to Umrah visits for a considerable time, the Government of Saudi Arabia resumed the religious pilgrimage for visitors arriving outside the Kingdom after taking stringent measures to preserve the health and safety of the pilgrims and to limit the spread of COVID-19[49]. These preparations were based on strict protocols stipulated by the Saudi Ministry of Hajj and Umrah, requiring hotels to provide food and refreshments, helping with isolation period (3 days), updating figures regularly, training workers for precautionary measures, and following preventive protocols [50].

Key recommendations

Based on the exploration of published studies and careful study of the practices adopted by the Saudi government to combat the spread of the Corona Virus, the authors have amassed the following recommendations to ensure the safety and wellbeing of migrant communities across the globe during pandemic situations:

1. *Inclusion of migrants in equitable response efforts*

a. During times of extreme hardships, the international migrant workers and refugees should not be left behind and should be included in public health interventions.

b. A cooperative relationship between local authorities and migrant communities, trust-building, and effective information-sharing can be helpful in effectively responding to threats related to the pandemic and changing social environments.

c. Limiting the burden and transmission of infectious diseases among migrants must require tailored health promotion, screening approaches, and accessible and responsive health systems regardless of legal status.

d. Particular attention should be paid to the living conditions of low-wage migrant workers, as they are more likely to be affected by epidemics due to high density and unhygienic built environment.

2. *Clear communication and access to reliable information*

a. Language barriers can act as a deterrent when information about new updates and policies is not disseminated in the native or spoken language of migrant communities. Therefore, public health campaigns should be immediately available in different languages and through different communication channels for international migrant workers [2].

b. To minimize the impact of fake news, governments should adopt new strategies to improve community and individual mental health services by ensuring accurate and evidence-based information.

c. Access to a reliable mHealth tool for underserved populations can help make important decisions about when and where to seek medical care. Therefore, in addition to direct responses towards the pandemic, the utility of mobile health technology should also be accentuated, which could lessen the burden on healthcare systems.

3. *Collaborative efforts at national and international levels*

a. The COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for 'an all-inclusive' approach in policy responses to local and migrant populations and calls for concerted efforts between policymakers, business leaders, NGOs and relevant migrant associations[23].
b. At the government level, the key to success in times of crisis lies in the collaboration of all government agencies through dedicated teamwork and integrated performance models[18].
c. For a successful response, the relevant bodies in both the migrants' countries of origin and in the receiving countries must establish effective coordination in addressing the problems faced by migrants.
d. In addition to the efforts needed from host governments, migrant workers' home governments must also act proactively to support their vulnerable citizens, including illegal workers, during these times[15].
e. Among other things, nations around the world should improve local manufacturing of goods, effective supply chains, equitable health infrastructure and workplace welfare, and a strong focus on youth, women, migrant communities and indigenous peoples.

Limitations

The reported results are based on the published literature within the given study period, and the authors included only those studies relevant to addressing the study objectives. Furthermore, all reported results are based on the narrative literature review, a more comprehensive systematic literature review can provide a deeper insight into this research topic. Additionally, future research should focus on a cross-sectional survey of migrant/expatriate communities to collect primary data on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on all key issues addressed in this study.

Conclusion

The study is the first of its kind to highlight how Saudi Arabia is responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on protecting the health and well-being of its migrant communities. It is noted that the government of Saudi Arabia has responded swiftly to the pandemic and continues to provide support and relief to its citizens and residents alike through a series of coordinated efforts to combat it. Some of the practices employed by the Saudi government to combat the COVID-19 pandemic include: (i) providing effective health communications; (ii) providing equitable health services, including providing immunizations to all expatriate workers; (iii) e-tracking of the health status of citizens and residents; (iv) improving the living conditions of migrant workers; (v) uninterrupted delivery of groceries, groceries and other items of daily use; (vi) introducing economic reforms in the labor sector; (vii) regulating border closures and travel restrictions; and (viii) regulating social and religious gatherings within the Kingdom. This study findings would be helpful for other developing countries to implement some of the strategies to effectively combat future pandemics. Future studies could focus on conducting a cross-sectional survey of migrant workers from different countries to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their health and well-being and the host country's response to it.

Authors Contributions:

S.A.I. conceived the original draft preparation. A.V.S. and N.T. were responsible for conception and design of the review. S.A.I. and N.T. were responsible for the data acquisition. A.V.S. and S.A.I. were responsible for the collection and assembly of the articles/published data, and their inclusion and interpretation in this review. S.A.I., A.V.S., and N.T. contributed equally to the present work. All authors contributed to the critical revision of the manuscript for valuable intellectual content. All authors have read and agreed with the final version of the manuscript. All authors contributed equally to the manuscript preparation.

Compliance with Ethics Requirements:

"The authors declare no conflict of interest regarding this article"

"The authors declare that all the procedures and experiments of this study respect the ethical standards in the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008(5), as well as the national law. Informed consent was obtained from all the patients included in the study"

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