Encouraging behaviour change to reduce Covid transmission

Summary of two rapid scoping evidence reviews

Authors

At the University of Oxford: Dr Ben Chrisinger¹, Zuyi Fang¹, Nia Roberts², Professor Trish Greenhalgh³
¹Department of Social Policy and Intervention, ²Bodleian Health Care Libraries, ³Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences *contact: Benjamin.Chrisinger@spi.ox.ac.uk

At Cochrane: Principal Investigators: Karsten Juhl Jørgensen, Chantelle Garritty, Robin Featherstone
Project Leads: Nicholas Henschke, Gemma Villanueva

Summary of review topic

The SARS-COVID-2 virus which causes COVID-19 is transmitted directly or indirectly between people. Its spread can be limited by making transmission less likely.

This briefing highlights the findings from two reviews of the literature on transmission. The reviews, undertaken in June 2020, excluded consideration of ventilation and air flow, and looked at 138 items found in a search of English- and Chinese-language publications in this area. This is a small subset of the 3,646 publications found overall on the subject. Many of these contain valuable practical information, but are not based in empirical research.

Evidence was gathered mainly for institutional settings including hospitals, offices, care homes and schools. Many are reported as measures of a process such as compliance with an intervention, and by a mix of self-reporting, direct observation and indirect measurement, for example the volume of hand gel used.

The interventions examined were of two main kinds:

1. Structural changes such as partitioning spaces in buildings; separating entrances and exits; adding screens, no-touch lighting and hand sanitiser dispensers; reorienting desks; and removing seating, fridges, kettles, and tableware.
2. Attempts to regulate the use of space. These included barriers, time limits on movement, the managed use of lifts and corridors, and restrictions on the use of shared spaces such as kitchens and lavatories, as well as signs such as markings indicating where to stand, and prompts to wash hands.

The review looked at steps which can be taken to encourage a range of outcomes. Some involved reducing the quantity and seriousness of interpersonal contact. Indicators of effectiveness include the proportion of people staying more than 2m apart, the proportion of people not oriented face-to-face, contact time between individuals, and the proportion of people using face coverings outside clinical settings. A further consideration was reduced surface-touching including the use of gloves and non-contact technology, while a third was hygiene including handwashing, sanitising and reduced face-touching.
and the rearrangement of student desks to face away from one another. Drive-through medicine has been implemented to decrease the number of symptomatic patients sitting in emergency department waiting rooms.

Transmission reduction raises unexpected issues of equity. Some of the commentaries analysed for this review describe risks for disadvantaged populations from social and physical distancing. According to the World Health Organisation, people with disabilities need access to information, continuity of care and social support, economic support, and non-discrimination, and need to be fully involved in decisions affecting them. They may be endangered by having a higher than expected need to touch surfaces and people, and by difficulties in accessing hand hygiene facilities. They may also be affected when care workers comply with social and physical distancing guidelines.

Prison populations are a further group for which virus transmission raises social justice considerations. Crowding can affect both prisoners and staff. And because much of the information flow about COVID-19 is electronic rather physical, it can be inaccessible to people with limited access to the internet and related technology.

Major evidence gaps
This research is unavoidably incomplete.

We do not know how transferable findings from institutions such as primary schools, universities, health care or care homes are to other settings, and most of the academic evidence comes from clinical care facilities.

More anthropological and sociological research on human behaviour and the physical environment could be found. For example, insights on crowding and pedestrian movement might be drawn from urban design and transport research.

What constitutes a ‘common sense’ intervention in the UK may not be so obvious elsewhere, and vice versa.