



## A Pledge on World TB Day

This editorial is based on [“Covid Lessons for TB”](#) which was published in Indian Express on 24/03/2022. It talks about the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the elimination efforts of Tuberculosis.

**For Prelims:** Tuberculosis, World Tuberculosis Day, Covid-19 Pandemic, WHO’s Global TB Report 2021, India Mission to Eliminate TB by 2025.

**For Mains:** Tuberculosis - India’s scenario and efforts to eliminate it, Covid- 19 Pandemic and TB - Impacts of Covid-19 on the elimination of TB.

As India steadily steers its way through the [Covid pandemic](#) to safer shores, it must foreground another disease - [Tuberculosis \(TB\)](#), which has been impacting the country for years, and **disproportionately affecting the vulnerable sections** of the society.

On [World Tuberculosis Day](#), we need to ask **how best we can leverage the lessons learnt from Covid-19** to help gain a new momentum in TB control.

The TB has remained neglected for too long. It’s time to acknowledge the magnitude of the disease, and work harder at **offering individuals equitable healthcare access and resources** that the disease warrants.

### India and Tuberculosis - What are the Stats?

- As per [WHO’s Global TB Report 2021](#), India reported **18 lakh TB cases in 2020** compared to 24 lakh cases in 2019.
  - With a total estimated incidence of 25.9 lakh TB cases, India is **home to a quarter of the global burden** of the disease.
  - In India, the TB case **fatality ratio increased from 17% in 2019 to 20%** in 2020.
- Since 2016, India has been on a mission mode to [eliminate TB by 2025](#), five years ahead of the global target.
- With a four-fold increase in the budget to tackle the disease and a patient-centric [National Strategic Plan for TB elimination](#), India had taken enormous strides towards reaching its goal.

### What are the Similarities and Differences between TB and Covid-19?

- Covid-19 and Tuberculosis (TB) are remarkably similar in the context that **they are both transmissible, airborne infections**.
  - Both are more **likely to spread in crowded settings**, and harm people with **immuno-compromising conditions**.
- However, between 2010-20, 1.5-2 million individuals died every year because of tuberculosis, yet, the word **“pandemic” was seldom used in the context of TB**.

- The **amount of money spent by governments** for research and development in the first 11 months of the Covid-19 pandemic was **162 times the corresponding amount spent on TB** in 2020.
- TB disproportionately **affects people in low-income nations**, the poor and the vulnerable.

## How Covid-19 Impacted the Elimination Efforts of TB?

- **Increase in Missing Cases:** The increased burden on healthcare to manage Covid-19 has led to a serious setback in TB control. In the past two years, **case detection has dropped**, leading to an **increase in the proportion of the “missing cases”** of TB.
  - According to the **Global TB Report 2021**, an **18% decline in case notifications** is perhaps the biggest indicator of the pandemic’s impact on global tuberculosis programmes.
- **Lockdowns and Economic Distress:** Fear of Covid-19 lockdowns and economic stress **discouraged people from visiting medical facilities** to get tested.
  - This **exacerbated the pre-existing health-seeking behaviour** of people who, under normal circumstances too, would shy away from getting medical care.
- **Access to Medicines:** For those diagnosed, **access to medicines has not always been easy** and during Covid-19, it became worse.
- **Understaffing in TB Healthcare Facilities:** The **redirection of human resources** within the health system during the three Covid waves has left TB facilities understaffed **leading to poorer quality and delayed care**.
- **Reactivation of TB Bacterium:** Studies have suggested that Covid may trigger pathways leading to **reactivation of dormant TB bacilli**.
  - The **tubercle bacillus** (or **Mycobacterium tuberculosis**) is a small, rod-shaped bacterium that can survive for months in a state of dryness and can also **resist the action of mild disinfectants**.

## What Could be the Way Forward?

- **Test, Treat and Track:** Test, treat and track has been a strategy successfully employed for Covid-19 we need to **aggressively scale up testing with innovative strategies** such as **active surveillance**, bidirectional **screening** for respiratory tract infections using the most sensitive molecular diagnostics, and **contact tracing**.
  - The biggest victory against Covid-19 has been the speed with which vaccines were developed, scaled up and deployed.
  - The same needs to be replicated for tuberculosis, lobbying for funding from governments and industry to **develop a successful vaccine for TB**.
- **Social Security Programmes:** Malnutrition, poverty and immuno-compromising conditions such as diabetes are some of the factors strongly associated with TB.
  - **Over a hundred million Indians smoke tobacco** — a strong risk factor for both developing TB, and dying from it.
  - **Social security programmes** that work towards **prevention of modifiable risk factors** would possibly pay richer dividends than an exclusive focus on “medicalising” the disease.
- **Engagement and Investment: Investments and public education for combating TB** can help turn this crisis into an opportunity to re-imagine our overburdened and underfunded systems.
  - India **needs to triple the funding** not just for TB but for health, nutrition and preventive services.
    - It also needs to **invest in state-of-the-art technologies, build capacity, expand its health workforce** and strengthen its primary care facilities.
  - Most importantly, before embarking on any of this, it needs to **build an open and collaborative forum** where all stakeholders, especially affected communities and independent experts, **take a lead role**.
- **Public Awareness:** For the TB mitigation strategy to be effective, it is important to **increase levels of awareness of people** about the disease.
  - It is also crucial to **ensure that the people affected by the disease overcome social insecurities** and access TB care and utilise the government’s TB programme.
  - **Elected representatives’ initiative** and participation can certainly help to amplify the right messages about available care services, destigmatize the disease and encourage

people to seek care.

- This could be achieved by **supporting grassroots workers such as [ASHAs](#), [anganwadi workers](#) and [self-help groups](#)** who strive hard to sustain a responsive health system at the local level.

***Drishti Mains Question***

“The increased burden on healthcare to manage Covid- 19 pandemic has led to a serious setback in TB control measures in India”. Comment.

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