

Narratives on face mask wearing from members of Navigating Knowledge Landscapes Network - the contribution No. 17

Country: **SERBIA**

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In Serbia, the first case of COVID-19 was detected on 6 March 2020, and a nationwide state of emergency was declared nine days later. The use of face masks was obligatory in the health care facilities, i.e. when dealing with patients. The general public was instructed to wear facial masks only if they have symptoms of COVID-19 (for example, cough, fever, and difficulty breathing) - a "soft" approach, similar to the WHO recommendations. Putting and removing the masks were described in detail on the website dedicated to the COVID-19 pandemic. The government/expert committee instructions were clear, but there was a shortage of both disposable and surgical masks in the beginning. Eventually, almost everyone wore masks in public (maybe to alleviate the fear and anxiety), but their use was often inappropriate.

I used to wear surgical masks regularly while I was at work in the hospital. I didn't take them off outside the hospital either, say while I was shopping or communicating with others outside of my apartment. When I get to the hospital in the morning, I usually disinfect my hands, measure my body temperature and get a disposable mask that I wear all the time while I'm at work. After leaving the hospital, I throw away that mask and put on a new one to go for shopping and communicate with other people outside the apartment. The bad thing is that the masks I used at work were often not of N95 standard.

People used different masks, whether walking alone or in company with others. Young children were often without a mask. The masks made breathing difficult and were inconvenient for those who wore glasses or heavy smokers. Public transport was suspended, only pharmacies and grocery stores were open, and people were not allowed to go outside on weekends. The elderly were locked in their apartments for a month and a half. Therefore, reduced communications during

the state of emergency have reduced the wearing of masks to occasional shopping or going to health care facilities.

Finally, as an anecdote, I would mention the recent case of expelling an opposition MP from the Assembly because he did not have a mask on his face, although the Prime Minister who warned the MP did not have a mask either.