



Exploring the Impacts of COVID-19 for Expatriates Living in Taiwan

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Over the years, globalization in Taiwan has tremendously grown from increased international trade and relationships to the investment, innovation and movement of people. Taiwan has generated an ecosystem of expatriates (defined as persons who live outside their native country) working in a variety of industries such as social work and technology. As the COVID-19 global pandemic stopped world activities, the expatriate lifestyle has also been impacted- restricting their movement lifestyle. COVID-19 has impacted the health, societal and economic sectors in a disruptive manner. Public health agencies are struggling to mobilize and convene strategies for the public on safe public health practices during a pandemic. Mass information has been produced in a short amount of time, often without a targeted audience, designed for the general public. In the midst of the pandemic, tailored communication and epidemic measures are often forgotten; returning to the traditional one-size-fits-all approach. A gap of research exists in understanding the types of barriers that expatriates face pre-, during and post-pandemic. An online survey was shared with participants' ≥ 18 years to gain a snapshot of how COVID-19 has impacted expatriates that are living in Taiwan by identifying behavior adaptation strategies and information-seeking methods. Results found there is some hesitancy in the public's trust on handling COVID-19, and expatriates need more information on how their status will be impacted by the pandemic. One of the most critical elements of reducing COVID-19 cases is public behavior. We look to call for action and for further research to understand the expatriate population in Taiwan to promote better health services and delivery for expatriate population during the epidemic.

Key words: expat, COVID-19, health behaviour, Taiwan

Introduction

Taiwan has been ranked as one of the best destinations in Southeast Asia for expatriates (defined as any persons who live outside their native country, also known as foreigner, migrant, etc.), gaining recognition for its qual-

ity of life, ease of settling in, cost of living and health system.¹ According to the National Immigration Agency Data (2019), there are over 787,000 foreign residents living in Taiwan.² Expatriates are drivers of globalization, bringing in a circulation of culture that enables new ideas of knowledge, attitudes and perceptions to the local economy. They are

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also challenged to overcome barriers such as language, understanding different health coverages, finding a new physician and more. The patterns of behavior for foreigner populations vary, often contrasting to the national population due to different social norms, religions and culture; impacting what local health authorities understand about behavioral insights of their population. Health interventions that work for the general population may overlook addressing the actual needs of expatriate groups. Governments need to consider expatriates in their health-related activities to ensure all health needs of the whole population are met.

COVID-19 situation

There is little research done about the health profiles of expatriate populations in Taiwan, creating a gap of knowledge in their impacts, attitudes and perceptions to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic that the world is facing today. As cases of suspected unknown respiratory cases emerged in Wuhan, China in December 2019, the world was not ready for its disruptive nature to global activities in all sectors.³ With over 67 million confirmed cases and over 1.5 million deaths, COVID-19 has become a frightening infectious pandemic.³ Epidemic prevention control have heavily focused on non-pharmaceutical interventions that include social and/or physical distancing, hygiene education, mandatory medical mask wearing, lockdowns and more.⁴ The virus had no specific and effective therapeutics or vaccines initially; driving the primary goal of old-style public health measures to prevent person-to-person spread of disease.⁴ One of the main tools and drivers to curb the pandemic is to rely and engage with public behavior. Authorities are challenged to deliver sustainable, tailored response strategies to guide public health action from the community and individual level.

Taiwan's story is also different than the rest of the world. Praised by the interna-

tional community for its swift and successful COVID-19 prevention efforts, the country has reported no local virus cases for over 200 days without any lockdowns.⁵ Epidemic prevention strategies relied on polices such as inspection and testing, international cooperation, infection control policies for medical institutions, stockpiling of masks and supplies, border control, and information protection.⁵ However, a criticism of the response notes that local and foreign populations faced different COVID-19 impacts.⁵ Selected epidemic control information that was quickly shared was only provided in Mandarin/English and not comprehensive, limiting the access to rapid, valid information. The changing border control measures caused confusion to visa applications and international traveling. Reports of restaurants banning foreigners had also emerged. Online groups quickly emerged as a source of information with community members helping each other by posting a translated version of new epidemic infection control policies as they emerged or sharing experiences at medical institutions. To move forward the next phase of the COVID-19 strategy, health authorities need to deliver a tailored public health approach that accounts for variation in risks across populations that formally includes expatriates.

A snapshot of COVID-19 impacts for expatriates living in Taiwan survey

Our team used the publicly available WHO COVID-19 survey for behavioral insights to formally gain a pilot snapshot of expatriates' perceptions of Taiwan's COVID-19 response to learn more about the impacts they are facing.⁶ The tool was developed as a rapid, flexible and cost-effective monitoring method of public knowledge, risk perceptions, behavior and trust.⁶ The questionnaire was adapted to the local context and current situation in Taiwan and was disseminated through online expatriate communities using a snowball method to recruit respondents. A total of 51 re-

sponses were collected from expatriates living across different regions of Taiwan from July 1st, 2020-August 31st, 2020. The nationality of the respondents showed a high variety, with the largest group coming from the United States (27.5%). Forty-eight per cent (24) of the participants answered “full-time employment” to the question of their main current occupation, 16 per cent (8) “studying” and 10 per cent (5) were freelancers at the moment participating the survey.

Majority of respondents had a beginner level of traditional mandarin (48%) and no knowledge of the Taiwanese dialect (72%). Forty-seven per cent of respondents shared they required the use of a translation tool to understand COVID-19 information in Taiwan. This raises the importance for language translation for outbreak risk communication; emphasizing that the translation should account for the languages commonly used in Taiwan. The Central Epidemic Command Center (CECC, TW) has addressed this by providing communication resources in seven different languages; targeting Southeast Asia countries dialogues.⁵ This can be explained by the large workforce of Southeast Asian workers in the blue-collared and social work industry.

One hundred per cent of respondents acknowledged measures such as hand-washing for 40 – 60 seconds but only 84% of respondents followed through with the action. There was confusion over the hand-washing protocol (20 seconds, limit hand contact with surfaces). A Likert scale was used to investigate the individual’s current COVID-19 situation and mixed results were reported. Eight point seven per cent of respondents found it was a little bit difficult for them to avoid a COVID-19 infection and only 47.83% reported they were following recommendations from authorities with 100% confidence. These results should provoke future studies into understanding why expatriates’ were confused about prevention measures and why they felt difficult to follow

recommendations. COVID-19 has released an “infodemic”, described as the overload of misinformation/disinformation.^{7,8} Health literacy levels for expatriates’ should be raised to understand how to appraise the information given to them and critically use it in their everyday activities. Health authorities should prioritize health literacy principles in dissemination of information to prevent the spread of rumors which can quickly escalate through the ease of social media.

When asked about the confidence level they had for organizations on handling COVID-19, no stakeholder received 100% total confidence showing hesitancy in some areas of public trust. Twenty-six of the 40 respondents were very satisfied with Taiwan’s overall country response and 16 of the 40 respondents were very satisfied with the support for expatriates in Taiwan. Only five respondents were satisfied with the support from their embassy/consular office in Taiwan. 71% of respondents responded the information they need the most during this time is how their status as an expatriate will be impacted by the pandemic. As border control and travel policies was a heavily affected area, it is recommended health authorities work closely with departments of foreign affairs to ensure expatriates’ feel safe in their current situation. Satisfaction rates emphasize the need for more understanding and insight into the expatriate health profile; suggesting a different perspective to address COVID-19 strategies.

Conclusion

Our findings raise questions about how expatriates perceive the understandability and actionability of Taiwan’s COVID-19 response. Governments are faced with an overwhelming response requirements and costs as the pandemic continues to prolong. As there is currently no research on these perceptions, future studies could collect evidence about those per-

ceptions and then compare them with national populations.⁹ Interventions could advocate for the training for health decision-makers to incorporate expatriates in strategic planning. Investigators could also conduct an environmental scan and stakeholder analysis of expatriate support in Taiwan. This information could help local health authorities plan ahead for providing clear health information during future events that require timely outreach to the public. This would also be helpful for the prevention of other infectious diseases beyond COVID-19 that local health authorities advocate to the public. Coordination between stakeholders will improve relationships between the local and international governments' allowing a sense of belonging to the host country. Expatriates population in Taiwan will only continue to grow due to cycle of globalization. Health authorities need to stress the perspective that expatriates are part of the local community to include their needs in COVID-19 strategies. Expatriates should be recognized as a priority group to unite care-seeking behavior and adherence to public health advice. It is important to include them in the planning process as they seek and interpret information differently than locals due to cultural and language barriers.

Author Contributions

TC introduced the topic as a study of interest. TC and XL drafted study design with input from CL. TC drafted the manuscript and all authors reviewed it in its entirety, and approved the final copy.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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