

ACCESSING HEALTHCARE SERVICES IN TIMES OF GLOBAL PANDEMICS: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS¹

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Abstract

In times of public health crisis, when healthcare systems worldwide are facing difficulties in functioning properly, healthcare providers as well as patients have to find ways to overcome problems such as difficulties in providing services related to medical examinations or/and medical treatment, difficulties in access to medications or therapies, lack of financial resources for patients to meet medical needs. Preventive activities as well as medical treatment lack a normal pathway of development when the healthcare facilities and the healthcare system itself are functioning under conditions of pandemic. Effective measures, mechanisms and solutions need to be implemented at global, national and regional level in order to make it possible for the healthcare systems to overcome the disturbance in providing services and access to healthcare and treatment.

Key Words: Health care system, access, pandemics, measures, solution.

INTRODUCTION

Maintaining population trust in the capacity of the health system to safely meet essential needs and to control infection risk in healthcare facilities is of high importance to ensure appropriate care-seeking behaviour and adherence to public health needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has put some health systems under immense pressure and stretched others beyond their capacity. All health systems around the world had their resilience tested during the COVID-19 pandemic; it is important to understand how to prepare them better. Responding to such public health emergency and successfully minimizing its impact requires every health resource to be leveraged.

Due to the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus healthcare systems are facing major challenges related to healthcare medical and hospital management, healthcare workforce capacity and social and economic burden caused by COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring access to health services is the cornerstone of a successful health response.

The pandemic has put healthcare systems to test. Although initially many COVID-19 response plans were framed in terms of a choice between saving lives and saving livelihoods, the error of this thinking was soon empirically proved and widely accepted. Any attempts to prioritize the economy without getting the virus under control proved to be undertaking. (World Health Organization, 2021)

In regards to health emergency crises as well as related to successfully deal with the COVID-19 pandemic ensuring health security. Assuring health security aims in protecting health facilities, healthcare system safeguard and security in providing healthcare services in order to be able to fulfil access to fundamental rights, as the right to health care and right to access to medical services and professional quality of care. As environmental and human

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conditions change, so does the status or level of protection. It is this phenomenon that requires organizations to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate their system of protection on a continuous basis. (Collins R., T. York, 2010)

The right to health is a fundamental human right that requires each person to create the conditions to be as healthy as possible. Access to care is an important aspect of right to health, as access to healthcare services should be available to everyone without facing unequal treatment, disproportions or discrimination. Governments have to ensure access to healthcare facilities and competent healthcare professionals as these characteristics along with socio-economic factors play an important part for health inequalities. (Neykova M., 2018). Public health crisis and pandemic situations may lead to delay of access to treatment which directly relates to negative effect on patients' health status and condition. In times of public health threats and pressure to healthcare systems, effectiveness and security mechanism integration could facilitate the establishment of patient-centered environment.

The capacity of hospitals and other health care providers to withstand the pressures of the pandemic depends on a variety of factors, including their financial status prior to the pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on revenue and expenses, and how much assistance they received from public payments and government investments. (Ochieng N., J. F. Biniek, M. B. Musumeci, T. Neuman, 2022).

The World Health Organization, in regard to financial crisis, has emphasized that health systems in order to be adopted to critical circumstances, have pursued very different policies, which may be divided into three types: policies aimed at changing the level of contributions to fund health services, especially by making budget cuts and increasing or introducing user charges for patients; policies aimed at changing the range and quality of services; and policies aimed at influencing the cost of care, especially by lowering the price of medical goods or lowering or freezing the salaries of health professionals, and by promoting the rational use of medicines.

CHALLENGES RELATED TO GLOBAL PANDEMICS

Main challenges have been observed at activities related to co-operation, communication and interference of different levels of health services in times of global pandemics. To facilitate linkages between the different levels of health services, it has been needed to introduce mechanisms to achieve improving prevention, detection and response to the spread of infectious diseases, including the novel coronavirus. Facilitating the access of crisis-affected populations and their surrounding communities could lead to equality, sufficiency and preparedness of health care services provision during crisis. It could also lead to minimise the post-crisis recovery period, as well as reduce undue congestion of hospitals and healthcare facilities.

Introducing medical ethical tools and skills in healthcare services during public health pandemic crisis is especially important, as medical ethics provides skills for ethical analysis as well as resolving ethical conflicts in medical practice, while identifying relevant ethical prerequisites of clinical decisions. Healthcare professionals approach related to ethical aspects and challenges in times of pandemics, could have special value in relation to responsibilities of medical professionals and healthcare providers as well as management operational services.

The pandemic has shown that some hospitals and health professionals are vulnerable due to various challenges including economic and financial difficulties caused by the global health pandemic. Some wealthy and prestigious health care institutions and practices can probably absorb and survive the immediate losses of financial sources inflicted by COVID-19. Financial instability though affects healthcare system stakeholders, hospitals and medical providers which could leave to major gaps in critical health care services.

Managers must consider two domains – external domains and internal domains, as they carry out various tasks and take decisions. External domains refer to the influence, resources and activities that exist outside of the boundary of the organization. The internal domains, on the other hand, refers to areas where managers need to address on daily basis, so to be able to ensure appropriate amount of medical personnel and appropriate type of healthcare professionals, in order to guarantee complexity and variety of healthcare services to patients and also to provide and ensure high quality level.

Building the resilience of health systems is an imperative for sustainable development and for managing public health critical situations such as pandemics. To enable reliable and shock-resistant services, providing healthcare must be linked to overall emergency management response systems. The successful development, implementation and monitoring of such management response systems directly relies on quality infrastructure

of healthcare providers and lifeline healthcare services chain. Such actions could be beneficial for protecting and improving personal health of patients and sustainability of healthcare systems.

One possible approach to overcoming negative impact on access to healthcare related to COVID-19 pandemic is introducing digitalisation in healthcare management and operational processes guidance. Digital technologies and digitalizing processes interfere significantly in various areas of life including social services, healthcare and medical services. (Neykova M. Digitalization of registries in the public administration – key elements of electronic governance) The implementation of appropriate digital health technologies is essential for achieving quality of services, effectiveness and efficiency of healthcare. Personal Electronic health record serves as individual's medical health dossier containing personal medical data and health information related to medical consultations and examinations provided, health status condition and treatment prescribed, where in electronic form all the relevant information is accessible and traceable.

Regulation on the protection of natural persons with regard to the processing of personal data by the European Union institutions, bodies, offices and agencies and on the free movement of such data, has been adopted in the light of Article 8 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and Article 16 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) guaranteeing that everyone has the right to the protection of personal data concerning him or her. The Regulation specifically refers to personal health data, as special category of data, establishing rules that special categories of personal data which merit higher protection, should be processed for health-related purposes only. Such processing is being allowed where necessary to achieve purposes for the benefit of natural persons and society as a whole, in particular in the context of the management of health or social care services and systems. (Regulation (EU) 2018/1725)

Electronic Health Data Records personal information could be used in cross-border healthcare accessing in regards to the application of right to health. For data protection purposes in relation to monitoring processing operations, at European Union level, institutions and bodies have the obligation to cooperate with the European Data Protection Supervisor. Electronic documentation tools offer many features that are designed to increase both the quality and the utility of clinical documentation, enhancing communication between all healthcare providers.

Healthcare providers, medical and non-medical personnel at all levels have demonstrated resilience and dedication to deliver the best possible care for patients and service users. Workers and employers can work together to advocate for prevention, raising awareness and building capacity of their members, and implementing workplace level occupational safety. Effective and efficient social security systems could act as powerful economic and social stabilizers of economies and societies.

In times of public health crisis introducing mobile healthcare services and health information technologies could contribute to a more efficient way of delivering care through public health pandemic due to better planning, and guidance on treatment and medication, but also due to focusing on guaranteeing public health rights in relation to compliance with the standards and principles. Promoting and protecting personal health is essential to human welfare and sustained economic and social development, as mobile technologies could ensure that everyone has immediate access to every intervention that may improve personal health or prolong peoples' lives. The ability of patients to have full access to information in the course of providing medical care could lead to guarantees for patients' autonomy. Access to healthcare, introduction of technological progress and provision of patient choice could result to sustainability in the healthcare sector. The main focus has to be put on the fact that the improvement of patient safety process is directly related to information.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

The global pandemic caused by COVID-19 has significantly changed the way consumers, patients and healthcare providers overview the access to healthcare. Strong primary and community health care ensures continuity of access to care services for all patients. This is especially required so basic human rights could be protected and the society could regain confidence and ambition to improve health. It is crucial that basic human rights standards and principles guide governments' efforts in response to the health crisis.

Delivering a clear and timely COVID-19 response strategy is critical. The strategy needs to be coherent, recognizing the perceived trade-offs between health and the economy and address implementation.

Strengthening monitoring, surveillance and early warning systems clearly falls within the scope of the health system as having an impact in terms of delivering an effective response to health crisis and COVID-19 pandemic. (World Health Organization (2021). The volume and nature of healthcare workers' and providers' roles, as well as healthcare system stakeholders' responsibilities have rapidly changed as in times of global pandemics. One area in which it is crucial that States to take human rights dimension into account is in making available medical treatment. Medical treatment and access to healthcare services should be available to everyone without discrimination. According to main legal and regulatory principles – no one should be denied treatment because they lack the means to pay for it or suffer stigma.

The instability of the legal system and the frequent changes in general and special legislative acts, regulating the activity of medical service provision within the healthcare system, causes difficulties both for the medical service suppliers and for the patients themselves. Transforming delivery of health services was essential in providing care for patients with COVID-19. Overcoming challenges and achieving sustainability in public health critical situations may be possible by taking steps towards:

- Introducing identification mechanisms, guidelines and tools for care essential health services detection in order to reduce the potential risk of inequalities regarding access to healthcare and public health services in times of emergency situations.
- Implementation of priority measures and increasing the health system potential for COVID-19 treatment capacity.
- Conducting functional mapping of health facilities for acute, chronic and long-term care, including those in public and private systems.
- Strengthening health workforce capacity by introducing appropriate measures for increase the availability of health workers, medical doctors and non-medical healthcare personnel, in line with population health needs in times of global pandemic.
- Establishing pathways for accelerated training and early certification of medical, nursing and other key trainee groups and ensuring they have supportive supervision.
- Development of educational modules and training tools for healthcare professionals, with specific focus to short-term and long-term consequences of COVID-19 on public health. Such educational and training programmes and solutions could result to building and strengthening capacity as introduced at national level with the active role and support of professional organizations, non-governmental organizations and governmental institutions.
- Implementation of decision-making tools and guidelines to support healthcare management process covering various public health stakeholders, including: medical services institutions, regulatory legislative structures and organizations both at national and regional level.

Proper identification and evaluation of main risk elements, resulting to insecurity in public health environment, could activate safeguarding mechanisms resulting to increase the preparedness of the healthcare system and its sustainability. The proper functioning of healthcare systems and the ability to provide normal access to healthcare services is crucial when overcoming the negative consequences of the coronavirus pandemic. Proper diagnostics, therapeutical actions and preventive measures, combined with multidisciplinary approach, effective coordination and exchange of successful practices, could provide safer living environment and could result to decreasing the pressure caused by the pandemic over the society and the healthcare system. Via horizontally integrated structures in healthcare it is possible to achieve economies required to offer multiple products (medical services) that diverse patient group desire. Integration processes in healthcare include not only involvement of physicians through ownership, employment relationships or governance of hospitals, but also provision of management services and information sharing, product line integration and clinical guideline utilization by the medical staff. Vertical integration on the other hand involves patient pathways to treat named medical conditions, connecting generalists and specialists, whereas horizontal integration involves broad-based collaboration to improve overall health. (DeMaeseneer J, Van Weel C, Egilman D et al. 2008) Most integrations in healthcare sector regarding COVID-19 pandemics have focused on selected components of the healthcare system, rather than the creation of seamless provider networks that encompass all aspects of the delivery system needed by patients.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the health care landscape, as it has put under a lot of pressure healthcare systems and has resulted to difficulties in accessing healthcare services, leading to the need of reshaping decision-making processes and redesigning main managing protocols.

The health financing system is one of the six elements of the health system—the remaining elements are service delivery; the healthcare workforce; information; medical products, vaccines and technologies and leadership and governance. The health financing system is supposed to interact with the other elements in order to improve health outcomes, to ensure financial protection, and respond to health consumers in an equitable, efficient and sustainable manner. (Abor P. A., J. Y. Abor, 2020).

Management of integration processes between physicians and organizations providing healthcare is critical for successful integration to occur. For the system to be successful, it is important to share cost and utilization data with medical staff, as well as to develop and disseminate practical guidelines, establishing accountability for profit/loses. An epidemic public health circumstances requires health facilities to alter priorities and adapt work routines in order to obtain coordinated, systemic response to a rapidly evolving, potentially complex situation.

The management of activities, connected to provision of medical services, requires attention to be paid not only to the competitive environment, but also to the normative requirements, regulating the access of the citizens to medical aid. Successful functioning of a given organization depends not only on the well-developed model of internal processes and methods for evaluation and control, but also on the management of the relationships with external entities – clients, suppliers, competitors, state administration, etc. One of the proven models for discovering possibilities for the establishment of a sustainable work model is cooperating with partners for optimization of the expenses for development activities and distribution.

Healthcare providers commonly refer to some form of computerized patient record system as the implementation of appropriate digital health technologies is essential for achieving quality of services, effectiveness and efficiency of healthcare. According to legal regulation everyone should have the right of access to personal data which have been collected concerning him or her, and to exercise that right easily and at reasonable intervals, in order to be aware of, and verify, the lawfulness of the processing. Exercising such right includes access to data concerning one's health, for example the data in one's personal medical records containing information such as diagnoses, examination results, assessments by treating physicians and any treatment or interventions provided. In the perspective of data processing, everyone should have the right to know and obtain communication in particular with regard to the purposes for which the personal data is being processed. (Regulation (EU) 2018/1725)

New technologies are offering numerous of opportunities to collect, use and share health data more efficiently. Processing of health data is fundamental for the good functioning of healthcare services, for patients' safety, for providing advance research and improving public health. Effective measures, mechanisms and solutions need to be implemented at global, national and regional level in order to make it possible for healthcare systems to overcome the disturbance in providing services and access of patients to healthcare services and treatment.

Global pandemic crisis resulted to COVID-19 has put the society in unfavourable conditions facing health, economic and social difficulties and challenges. The integration and coordination of healthcare at countrywide or region-wide system contributes to optimization of management and therapeutic efforts. The improvement of medical services contributes to detailed monitoring of therapeutic treatment. In order to plan best care, healthcare provider must enable comprehensive integration of healthcare effort.

Civil society participation in the formulation of policies and monitoring of the overall health system could provide the opportunity to rethink and reshape the structures, norms, and bases of healthcare system accountability in times of public health crises and global pandemic emergencies.

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