



COVID-19 patient pathways: Policy Recommendations

Addressing high-risk patients' unmet needs and challenges



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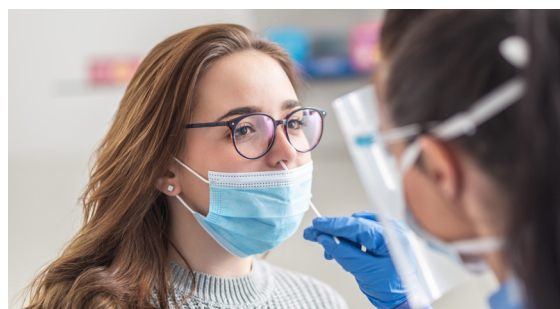


I. FOREWORD

In March 2020 the world experienced the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and three years on, its variants are still active on a global scale. The pandemic, in addition to bringing catastrophic numbers of cases and deaths, highlighted the fragility of European healthcare systems and visualised the lack of adequate investment in public health and pandemic preparedness overall. To support Member States in responding to the pandemic, European policymakers put in place COVID-19 measures, including the vaccine strategy and a joint EU pandemic response mechanism for the entire population of the EU and supported Member States in tackling the then-unknown pandemic.

Since then, a clear deprioritisation of the undertaken actions to fight the pandemic has been driven at national and European levels as vaccination strategies, free screenings, updated and accessible COVID-19 data and public awareness of the accessible and existent treatments for COVID-19 have been left aside. Yet, it is worth noticing that the pandemic still exists, and remains deadly, especially for patients who are at a higher risk as they can suffer from severe conditions such as chronic, respiratory, cardiovascular, oncological or any other form of the disease.

Through these recommendations, we aim to expose the current challenges and barriers related to COVID-19 for high-risk groups and pave the way to improve patient care pathways. The goal of the present document is to support policymakers in working towards ensuring that patients have their medical needs met - while promoting better education among healthcare professionals and reinforcing the need for further building national healthcare systems preparedness.



II. RECOMMENDATIONS

I. PUBLIC AWARENESS AND COMMUNICATION ON COVID-19 SYMPTOMS AND RISKS

RECOMMENDATION

Member States, in collaboration with civic and patient organisations, should support raising public awareness about COVID-19-related risks. Communications campaigns should be tailored to different categories of high-risk groups.

As COVID-19 has lost prominence on the political agenda, many high-risk patients have a high degree of misinformation about the current COVID-19 measures put in place, leaving patients insufficiently informed on how to minimise their exposure and risks of COVID-19. As such, a joint collaboration between civic and patient organisations and national governments may support patient communities in increasing public awareness about continuous risks related to COVID-19. It is key to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information related to symptoms, early testing, and treatment, is disseminated to those who are at a higher risk, as a prompt diagnosis is crucial for a better clinical course.

RECOMMENDATION

Member States, in collaboration with medical scientific societies, should earmark resources to support healthcare professionals' knowledge acquisition of existing COVID-19 treatments.

Knowledge of existing COVID-19 treatments is critical for healthcare professionals (HCPs) to provide effective care to patients. By providing resources to support their education and continuous training, Member States can help ensure that patients receive the best possible care and treatment options to reduce the possible severe Covid-19 symptomatology.

By equipping HCPs with the necessary information, expertise, and resources they need to provide optimal diagnostic and treatment, lives can be saved, patient management optimised, and financial costs reduced, diminishing the burden that COVID patients may produce on healthcare systems.

RECOMMENDATION

To improve the level of patient knowledge about the risks of COVID-19, and overall trust in healthcare, national governments should provide the necessary support to improve communication skills of healthcare professionals.

Identifying COVID-19 symptoms early is critical to prevent the spread of the virus and limit its impact on public health. The lack of citizen and patient trust in healthcare represents, however, one of the main barriers towards timely testing and diagnosis of COVID-19. As such, at the national level, governments and healthcare organisations should invest in upskilling the communication skills of HCPs regarding the importance of identifying early COVID-19 symptoms, as well as in circulating appropriate relevant information and promoting trusted sources and channels of communication. This can be done through training programs, continuing education, and other initiatives aimed at improving communication skills.

II. TRANSFORMATION OF HEALTH SERVICES

RECOMMENDATION

To address challenges for COVID-19 patients, including those living in rural or remote areas, Member States should prioritise investment in eHealth infrastructure, including telemedicine, digital health records and health information exchange systems.

The aftermath of the pandemic showcased that telemedicine is an effective option to fight public health emergencies, by complementing traditional healthcare services. There are many advantages when it comes to deploying telemedicine as the use of such tools: not only reduces the number of face-to-face visits but improves and shortens patients' pathways to receiving medical prescriptions. When it comes to high-risk patients, telemedicine allows them to receive medical care without leaving their homes, reducing the risk of exposure to COVID-19 in healthcare facilities.

Policymakers should address disparities in access to eHealth services among different patient populations, including those living in rural or remote areas, and those from disadvantaged or marginalized communities. This should be done in parallel with the development of clear guidelines on the services that can be provided, the professionals that will provide them and the patients that receive them. To this end, the decision-makers should be in constant communication with patient representatives to ensure the proper use of telemedicine.

RECOMMENDATION

Member States should consider strengthening the role of pharmacists, considering the high level of trust patients put in them. This would not only improve patients' trust in the overall healthcare system but also would contribute to reducing existent health disparities.

Pharmacists can help in COVID-19 testing and vaccination efforts in underserved areas, making it easier for individuals in those areas to access testing and vaccination services. They can further contribute to managing the medications of COVID-19 patients and support their adherence to treatments, ensuring they receive the proper medication regimen prescribed by their healthcare provider and providing reliable information on the disease. As such, pharmacists can work collaboratively with other healthcare providers to manage COVID-19 patients, providing valuable support to healthcare teams.

RECOMMENDATION

To better respond to future eventual health crises, multidisciplinary and versatile medical and patient pathways should be created by Member States to ameliorate the current challenges and barriers that the population face.

The current pathways have been shown to lack effectiveness, innovation, and functionality. Overall efficient response of national healthcare systems must include an upgrading of the existent patient and medical pathways with the aim of addressing eventual health crises. The lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic along with the latest developments in telemedicine and e-health shall be integrated by Member States as an essential basis to set up these avant-garde pathways to diminishing challenges and barriers experienced by patients.

III. SETTING UP A COMPREHENSIVE POLICY FRAMEWORK

RECOMMENDATION

Member States shall put in place measures to ensure that high-risk groups have access to free COVID-19 testing kits.

At-risk groups, such as older adults, and individuals with underlying health conditions, are more vulnerable to severe illness and death from COVID-19. Free testing can help identify cases early, allowing for timely medical intervention and reducing the risk of complications.

The cost of COVID-19 testing can be a financial burden for many individuals and families, especially those who are at increased risk of infection. Providing fully reimbursed testing can reduce the financial burden of COVID-19 from the patients perspective and ensure that at-risk groups have access to essential healthcare services, and finally, it can also contribute to reducing the economic impact of the pandemic.



RECOMMENDATION

Member States shall ensure that COVID-19 is kept at the forefront of national healthcare policies and adopt adequate health policies to better respond to the challenges of future health crises.

The advent of new vaccines and antiviral treatments against COVID-19 has led to a decrease in the number of cases and deaths from COVID-19. As such, national governments have ceased to continue addressing the risks related to the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to a low perception of Covid-19 real risks, especially, for high-risk populations, which lack access to COVID-19 data.

To ensure a sufficient overall response of national healthcare systems to an eventual outbreak of future pandemics, it is necessary to create adequate and flexible health policies to better respond to the challenges of addressing future health crises.

RECOMMENDATION

The European Commission's Health Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) should work towards guaranteeing equitable access to COVID-19 treatment. Alongside joint procurement, additional guidelines should be set when it comes to unified guidelines for patient accessibility.

Joint procurement and unified guidelines can help to streamline the response to COVID-19, reducing the administrative burden on healthcare providers and enabling them to focus on providing high-quality care to patients. Moreover, harmonised guidelines, including when it comes to a common definition of high-risk patients, can facilitate national and cross-border care coordination by providing clear instructions for patient referrals and transfer of care, as well as enabling healthcare providers to communicate effectively and share patient data securely.

RECOMMENDATION

The European Commission, through the development of work programmes of EU funding mechanisms, including Horizon Europe or EU4Health programmes, should further support research facilities in improving COVID-19 prevention, detection, monitoring and treatment, including post-COVID effects.

The havoc that the national healthcare system endured during the COVID-19 pandemic is the outcome of a lack of prioritisation of healthcare policies and investments at national, regional, and European levels. As such, it is crucial to increase investment in the national/regional primary healthcare system and to support further European development and innovation to ameliorate healthcare providers resources, patients' quality of healthcare attention and life and to further develop innovative diagnostic tools and treatments which can optimise patients and medical care pathways.

In addition, to ensure a holistic approach it is also of paramount importance to support research in understanding and treating post-infection complications, such as long COVID, that represent an important healthcare and social burden.



