



Health Services

Providing health services effectively during the first wave of COVID-19: A cross-country comparison on planning services, managing cases, and maintaining essential services ?

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered abrupt challenges for health care providers, requiring them to simultaneously plan for and manage a rise of COVID-19 cases while maintaining essential health services. Since March 2020, the COVID-19 Health System Response Monitor, a joint initiative of the European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, the WHO Regional Office for Europe, and the European Commission, has documented country responses to COVID-19 using a structured template which includes a section on provision of care. Using the information available on the platform, this paper analyzes how countries planned services for potential surge capacity, designed patient flows ensuring separation between COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients, and maintained routine services in both hospital and ambulatory settings. Despite very real differences in the organization of health and care services, there were many similarities in country responses. These include transitioning the management of COVID-19 mild cases from hospitals to outpatient settings, increasing the use of remote consultations, and cancelling or postponing non-urgent services during the height of the first wave. In the immediate future, countries will have to continue balancing care for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 patients to minimize adverse health



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outcomes, ideally with supporting guidelines and COVID-19-specific care zones. Looking forward, policymakers will have to consider whether strategies adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic will become permanent features of care provision. (c) 2021 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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