

JANUARY 2021

# NAVIGATING CANCER CARE

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*During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Summary of the 2020  
Virtual Meeting of  
**Cancer Advocacy Organizations**





## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a drastic impact on health care systems across the world and on patients' ability to access care. Some patients have had appointments postponed or canceled. They have experienced delays in accessing their treatments. Or, they've been scared to seek treatment due to fear of exposure to COVID-19.

**For people living with cancer, these disruptions have been particularly dangerous.**

To explore the challenges facing cancer patients during COVID-19, the Global Alliance for Patient Access virtually convened patient groups specializing in

cancer from across Latin America and Canada. The webinar, "Navigating Cancer Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic," featured presentations by cancer patient advocacy organizations from:

- **Argentina**
- **Brazil**
- **Canada**
- **Colombia**
- **Mexico**

Each organization discussed the impact COVID-19 has had on treatment access for its patient populations and offered best practices for ensuring continuity of care as the pandemic lingers.



## Speakers & Discussion

The event's diverse lineup of speakers each offered insights about the challenges facing patients in their country and the importance of collaborative advocacy moving forward.



### **Yolima Méndez,**

**Executive Director, Fundación Colombiana de Leucemia y Linfoma,** shared some of the challenges cancer patients in Colombia were facing with continuity of their treatment during the pandemic.

Sharing the initial results of a survey the organization had conducted, Méndez reported that, of the 761 patients who completed the survey, 58.8% reported difficulty in accessing health services. The main concerns that patients expressed included: continuity of care, risk of COVID-19, the delivery of medications and economic necessities.

The survey results underscored the importance of patients continuing to seek treatment or continue their treatment for cancer through the pandemic. Leaving cancer untreated, Méndez emphasized, can be a dangerous alternative.



### **Adela Ayensa Alonso,**

**CEO, Salvati AC,** discussed the obstacles cancer patients in Mexico have faced during the pandemic and what patient organizations were doing to help.



Patients in Mexico also are seeing delays and cancellations of appointments, lack of medications, fear of exposure to COVID-19 and an overflow to the hospital systems. One of the biggest problems was the lack of information available to patients, so Salvati AC looked for ways to support patients with accurate and effective information.

They also looked for ways to collaborate and establish new relationships with decision makers to ensure that their patient population could be heard.



**Tiago Farina Matos,**  
*Counsel and Coordinator of the Advocacy Center, Instituto Oncoguia,* provided a legal perspective.

As with Mexico and Colombia, cancer patients in Brazil have been seeing interruptions to their cancer treatment due to COVID-19. As it looks like the COVID-19 pandemic is something that the health systems will be dealing with over the next few years, Matos shared goals to protect treatment access for cancer patients, specifically diagnosis, treatment and safety.

Patients continue to fear exposure to COVID-19 and so are not seeking the treatment they need for cancer, Matos noted. By focusing on continuing to diagnose and treat in a safe environment, advocates and health care providers can help to ensure that patients do not experience disruptions to care.



**María de San Martín,**  
*Director, Fundación Donde Quiero Estar,* laid out some of the work that her organization had been doing to support patients in Argentina.

Efforts included accompanying patients to appointments and helping them with transportation, having a team of social workers and providing a support line through WhatsApp and the platform mundocancer.com.

What was truly important, she noted, was the need to work together. She emphasized how much more can get done for patients when patient organizations work together and alongside policymakers in the country.



### **Sabrina Hanna,**

***Founder and CEO, the Cancer Collaborative COLAB,***

described how patients in Canada were seeing delays in their cancer treatment, which was leading to higher mortality rates.

Not only has COVID-19 delayed treatment, Hanna explained, but also it has stalled the progress and advancements made in cancer treatment like precision medicine. Precision Medicine Awareness Month in November served as an opportunity to focus on the message that patients need to understand the safety and necessity of continuing their cancer care.

Hanna noted that continued advocacy efforts can help make sure that diseases outside of COVID-19, such as cancer, do not take a backseat during the pandemic.

## CONCLUSION

**The day's discussion made one point quite clear: cancer care cannot wait.**

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that:



- Health systems need to find safe and effective ways to ensure that cancer patients, and others, can continue to access the care they need.



- Patients who choose to stay at home rather than seek treatment due to the fear of exposure to COVID-19 may inadvertently be exchanging one health risk for another.



- Delayed care can allow patients' cancer to worsen and progress.

Encouraging patients to continue seeking care for their cancer, even during the pandemic, was the recurring theme of the day. Participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic continues to remind us of the many health challenges patients and advocates have in common, and how much more successful they can be in solving them when they collaborate with one another.



### **About the Global Alliance for Patient Access**

The Global Alliance for Patient Access is an international platform for health care providers and patient advocates to inform policy dialogue about patient-centered care.

**GAfPA.org**

