

INFECTIOUS RESPIRATORY DISEASE IN EUROPE

The Pathway to Protection



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic opened the world's eyes to the devastating and far-reaching impact of infectious respiratory diseases. It also revealed opportunities for policymakers in Europe, with the help of patient advocates, to improve public health infrastructure, outreach and impact.

Beyond COVID-19, other infectious diseases such as influenza and respiratory syncytial virus – or RSV – also levy a serious burden on communities and health care systems across Europe. Like COVID-19, these viruses can lead to:

- Stresses on limited health care resources
- Increased disability
- Workplace absenteeism and lost productivity
- Disruptions in caregivers' ability to serve
- Loss of human life.¹

Infectious respiratory diseases particularly burden at-risk populations such as older people, those who are immunocompromised and people living with chronic conditions. These diseases also worsen health disparities, with higher incidence of serious respiratory infections in communities of colour and low-income populations.²

With an eye towards the now-endemic COVID-19 virus, as well as the broader threat of other infectious respiratory diseases, European policymakers need a broader post-pandemic public health strategy. Such a strategy should “normalise” COVID-19 so that people recognise that it, like influenza and RSV, remains a serious, seasonal infectious respiratory disease to be contained through vaccination. A broader strategy would also build public confidence in vaccines as a safe, low-cost way to mitigate the risks of infectious respiratory conditions.

Lessons Learnt from COVID-19



All infectious respiratory diseases spread without regard to geopolitical borders, making prevention and treatment a pan-European issue. An effective health policy response requires coordination among nations, regional and local authorities, health care systems and individual health care providers.

Several other public health realities emerged from Europe's experience with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consistent & Equitable Access to Vaccines is Critical

Consistent, equitable access to vaccines is central to a successful pan-European strategy. Though vaccination was not an option in the earliest days of the pandemic, several vaccines have since been approved to prevent COVID-19. Vaccines are also available for RSV and influenza. Each has been proven safe and beneficial, both for the people vaccinated and for public health in general.

An inoculation can prevent infection or mitigate the severity of disease symptoms. And, when sufficient numbers of a

community's population are immunised, vaccines can also impede the spread of the virus. For Europe to capture the full benefit of vaccines, however, access needs to be consistent from country to country.

Disinformation Can be Deadly

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a lack of coordinated public health strategies combined with social media disinformation to fuel vaccine scepticism. Health authorities often provided inconsistent, even contradictory, information to the public. The result was widespread confusion and frustration, leading to mistrust in

authoritative, evidence-based guidance.^{3,4} This, in turn, created an information vacuum, which was quickly filled by health disinformation and vaccine scepticism.

Uncertainty and anxiety prompted an unprecedented number of people to research online for treatment options. In some instances, individual research led people to try prevention strategies or treatments that were not grounded in medical evidence, sometimes resulting in harm or death.⁵

A Loss of Urgency Fuels Inaction

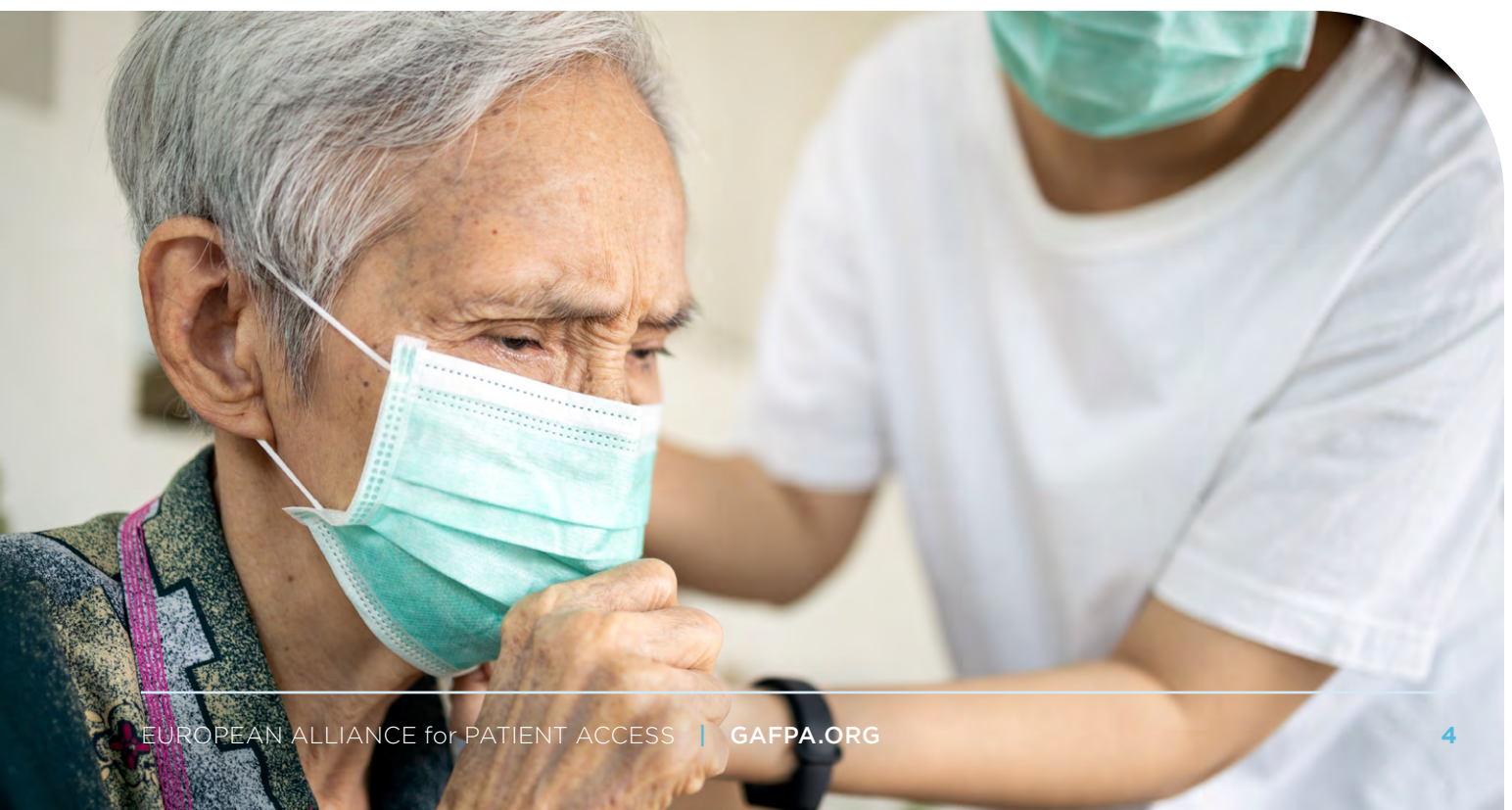
With low public confidence and high levels of confusion, many people simply stopped seeking information or tuned out from public health updates. The public grew weary of mixed messaging and a news cycle dominated by COVID-19.⁶

As a result, many people no longer feel a sense of urgency about COVID, other

infectious respiratory diseases or vaccination in general. Yet at-risk groups such as seniors and people who are immunocompromised maintain a high risk for complications from these diseases.⁷

It is now apparent that public health officials, stakeholders and advocates were simply not aligned on their COVID-19 strategies. The uncoordinated response allowed disinformation to spread, undermining public trust.

Even today, as the world lives with the endemic COVID-19 and anticipates future pandemics, vaccination uptake has declined. The World Health Organisation described global vaccination rates for COVID and the flu as “incredibly low” in early 2024, with fewer than one-third of high-risk Europeans, such as the elderly or immunocompromised, receiving a COVID booster shot. Many people remain sceptical of public health information.^{8,9}



There are no easy answers to the problems laid bare by the pandemic and certainly no one-size-fits-all solutions. But, as laid out below, a consensus is emerging on certain strategies. Officials and policymakers must take care that any solutions they pursue are data driven, coordinated and clearly communicated, or they risk eroding their credibility further.

Data-Driven Decisions

The best way to rebuild public trust and combat disinformation is for authorities to provide accurate health information consistently across communication platforms. At this point, any significant misstep could increase mistrust in public health officials beyond repair.

Therefore, investing in science and real-world data collection to better understand the virus and align stakeholders is critical. Researchers should continue to explore the virus, its variants and the effects of long COVID. A greater understanding of preventing other infectious respiratory diseases, including influenza and RSV, is equally important.

Once data and research findings are clear, public health officials should develop and test communications strategies. Before deploying new public service announcements, messaging should be rigorously tested and refined using focus groups and other traditional marketing tools.

To ensure a cohesive approach, officials should make effective strategies and data available to all stakeholders, not just throughout Europe but across the globe.

Above all, a proactive response, rather than a reactive approach, will improve confidence and ensure that patients get correct, consistent information via a range of platforms and channels in a timely manner. Mistakes, which inevitably occur, should be reported and explained immediately so the public sees officials as transparent and honest.

Coordinated Vaccination Campaigns

EU member states pooled their resources during the first few months and years of the pandemic to buy vaccines under advance purchase agreements between the European Commission and several pharmaceutical companies.¹⁰

Moving forward, governments at both an EU and member-state level must continue to support appropriate procurement methods, whether that be joint procurement, national tender, reimbursement or another alternative. Proper procurement allows for the swift purchasing and equitable distribution of vaccines across the continent.

Viruses can evolve as they spread. The vaccines available need to be those best suited to current strains. Advance vaccine agreements must take that timeliness into

consideration. An ideal arrangement would prioritize a lean approach that puts all vaccine manufacturers on a level playing field and delivers a diverse offering of vaccines.

Having a variety of vaccines available allows people to access the vaccine best suited for their individual needs and preferences, encouraging uptake and confidence. Some patients, for example, may have health conditions that prevent them from taking certain vaccines. A range of vaccine options also creates a more resilient supply chain, decreasing the possibility of shortages and delays in deliveries.

Another valuable strategy is to pair vaccinations for different infectious respiratory diseases. Consider the flu and COVID, for example. If a regular flu shot can be accompanied by a COVID booster, patients may find it easier to remain up-to-

date with protective measures. With ongoing support for research and development, technology could one day streamline the process still further by yielding a combined vaccine that inoculates against both COVID and the flu with a single shot.¹¹

By giving people options while also making immunisation efficient, officials can reinforce vaccination as a safe and necessary routine.

Ground-Level Involvement

Though some people's faith in public health officials has wavered, the public remains confident in their health care providers.

Physicians and nurses are still a trusted source for the public, and the role that they play in distributing information is critical. Providing them with proper guidance and coordinating resources at the local level will help them transfer information to patients in a clear, timely manner.

Regional and even national stakeholders can then leverage this one-on-one relationship and strong local cohesion, but only if they present a united front. When high-profile stakeholders came together in the earliest months of the pandemic, it often had a profound impact. Replicating this approach will help ease confusion and improve advocates' reach.

Above all, treatments and vaccinations must remain available, accessible and affordable. Patients and their health cannot be entangled with public opinion or politicised debates.



Opportunities for Advocacy

Infectious respiratory disease stakeholders serve a unique role, linking the at-risk patient community to the world of policymakers. On the issue of public health and infectious respiratory diseases, they are critical in translating proposed solutions into policy action.

Engaging Policymakers

Stakeholders should convey their support for effective solutions to officials, whether that be Members of European Parliament, European Commission officials, the European Council or policymakers at the national level. Outreach could entail contacting their individual leaders, organizing letter-writing campaigns, or orchestrating public events that encourage collaboration among EU states and public health authorities.

They should also continue to emphasise equitable access to vaccines and urge decision-makers to prioritise countering health disinformation.

Stakeholders have an important role in urging policymakers to promote vaccination and to assess and improve national immunisation plans. They can also encourage stakeholder collaboration on long COVID awareness and vaccine trust.

Supporting Health Literacy Efforts

Deficits in health literacy became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. Officials



cannot wait until the next pandemic to actively improve the average citizen's ability to seek out, understand and act upon credible health information.

Advocates can promote health literacy by encouraging the public to use official apps and websites to remain aware of developments regarding viruses, especially during a pandemic. These resources can help patients easily keep track of their vaccination records and learn about public health trends and vaccination opportunities.

Another important effort is advocating for patients to have digital access to medical records. As these records become more common, advocates should seek to make sure patients can easily obtain their information.

These digital tools should be normalised to enhance access to accurate information and to improve decision-making.

Encouraging International Preparedness & Coordination

Stakeholders have several opportunities to encourage coordinated preparedness initiatives.

Engaging with national policymakers can improve efforts to develop and implement pandemic preparedness initiatives like the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response.

Likewise, supporting and partnering with advocacy organizations can empower advocates to promote broad access to

immunisation. These efforts encourage protection against infectious respiratory disease among both individuals and the wider community. Moving forward, more sustained efforts are needed at both the pan-European and national level.

On a global level, advocates can follow the progress of — and sometimes participate in — public hearings for the World Health Organization Intergovernmental Negotiating Body. The group, which represents all regions of the world, is drafting and negotiating solutions on prevention, preparedness and response ahead of the next pandemic.

Conclusion



Public health responses to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed ongoing challenges and unmet needs associated with protecting the public from infectious respiratory diseases. By reflecting upon the lessons learnt, advocates can align with public health officials and policymakers to adopt more effective communication and vaccination strategies.

Now is the time to update public health protocols across Europe and the globe before the pressures arising from any next pandemic make the challenges more difficult. Stakeholders should keep pressing for public health authorities and policymakers to implement new pathways and strategies that protect patients from the multifaceted impact of infectious respiratory diseases.

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Organizations

European Alliance for
Patient Access

Active Citizenship Network

Coalition for Life Course
Immunisation

European Patients Forum

Happy Ageing

International Longevity
Centre - UK



About the European Alliance for Patient Access

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

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