

4.4 The failure to sustain the response in the face of the crisis

4.4.1 National health systems under enormous stress

Health systems and health workers were not prepared for a prolonged crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has taken an enormous physical and emotional toll on the world's health workers. The health systems which had been under-resourced and fragmented over a long period prior to the pandemic were the least resilient. Delivery of essential health services, including those for sexual and reproductive health, noncommunicable and communicable diseases, immunization, and other health programmes were interrupted, with wider impacts in low- and middle-income countries. People with underlying conditions were neglected. People in aged care were especially vulnerable to COVID-19 and for many high-income countries, the huge wave of deaths in these facilities showed profound flaws in protections against a new health threat and in the way care for the elderly and vulnerable is provided.

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, graphic news footage was broadcast of thousands of distressed patients overwhelming health facilities around the world, many of which were woefully unprepared for the surge. Ambulances queued, emergency rooms overflowed, and hospital beds were dangerously oversubscribed. In Spain, as an example, many intensive-care units operated at 200–300% of capacity, and other countries felt similar strain.

Holding it all together were health professionals and other essential workers on the front line—medical technicians, doctors and nurses, border and quarantine staff, midwives and community workers, food suppliers and cleaners—working hour after hour, often lacking adequate protective equipment and patient supplies, watching helplessly while patients died without loved ones by their sides, and worrying about their own health and families. Response measures added to their stresses—as schools and day-care centres closed down, parents who were essential workers found themselves having to juggle impossible demands on their time.

4.4.2 Jobs at risk

In addition to health workers, the pandemic has also affected other essential workers, including those self-employed, small and medium sized entrepreneurs, those working in food shops, delivery and transportation and cleaning, and at national and subnational borders. Those involved in meat processing were at particular risk

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