

The legacy of COVID-19

Episode 10 of the webinar series

'Health Management in action: Fostering health systems' resilience'

Speaker

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The tenth episode of the webinar series '*Health Management in action: fostering health systems' resilience*' focused on the role of Family Doctors in measuring and counteracting global environmental health threats at the local level and the legacy of COVID-19.

According to the World Health Organization, **23% of all global deaths are linked to the environment (roughly 12.6 million deaths a year)**. Moreover, the WHO stated that between 2030 and 2050, climate change will cause 250,000 additional deaths per year due to malaria, malnutrition, diarrhoea, and heat stress. To address climate change, **the local implementation of global strategies is needed**. Considering General Practitioners' (GPs) and Paediatricians' influence on individual patients and communities, they could play a role in connecting global concerns with local actions.

In the case of climate change, non-fatal health effects such as allergic, endocrine, and metabolic diseases are early indicators of environmental health conditions. A delay in quantifying these conditions could yield disarrangement of the overall health system with remarkable effects on individual and public health. Environmentally-driven effects on health are highly complex to interpret; multidisciplinary coordination is still to be improved; and coupling the epidemiological mission with the influential role of Family Doctors (FDs) is still a challenging mission. Sentinel physicians provide support to overcome those challenges.

Vivian Van Casteren defined a sentinel network of GPs as "*a system that keeps a watchful eye on a sample of the (overall) population by supplying regular and standardised reports on the incidence and the main epidemiological characteristics of specific diseases and of procedures in primary healthcare*". Sentinel physicians support public education and awareness raising. They are involved on a daily basis in local, regional, and national strategies to tackle antimicrobial resistance (AMR) within a One Health approach. Moreover, they can implement early alert systems, thus impending weather extremes and infectious disease outbreaks. Sentinel physicians can enhance disaster preparedness, including increasing the capacity of the health system to respond to emergencies. Their role is key in implementing infectious diseases control programmes in fields such as food safety, vaccine programs, case detection and treatment, and in improving surveillance through vector control, risk indicators, and health outcomes. Finally, they can support the establishment of appropriate health workforce training.

The Italian Network of Sentinel Physicians for the Environment - Rete Italiana Medici Sentinella per l'Ambiente (RIMSA) carries on epidemiological surveillance and advocacy duties. RIMSA aims to promote a GP and Paediatrician's profile able to take care of Environmental Health prevention activities, especially in the area of climate change. The Network strives to reaffirm the role of GPs and Paediatricians in promoting healthy habits

and sustainable lifestyles, not only in terms of individual health (micro) but also within a collective (meso) perspective of Planetary Health (macro).

Multidisciplinary collaboration among GPs, Paediatricians, hospitals, and actors involved in prevention needs to be regulated by a policy framework. Regulations could facilitate health managers' efforts to contain environmental threats to health. Health managers can support the education of health professionals about environmental health issues.

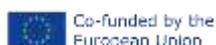
Lessons learnt from the COVID pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic likely had a zoonotic origin. Such a possibility increased the importance of the One Health approach, the unity of multiple practices that work together locally, nationally, and globally to help achieve optimal health for people, animals, and the environment. Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is an example of a field where the One Health approach should be implemented.

The outbreak of COVID-19 in time and space clarified that the distinction between local and global has largely become superficial. The pandemic also emphasised the crucial role of Primary Health Care (PHC) in diagnosis, screening, triage, and monitoring activities. The current emergency has highlighted the need for GPs to work in coordination with PHC and hospitals: a multidisciplinary workforce can play a vital role in recognising and managing environmental and social factors of community health.

Take-home messages

- GPs and Paediatricians could play a helpful role in connecting global concerns about environmental impacts on health with local actions.
- Environmentally-driven effects on health are highly complex to interpret; multidisciplinary coordination is still to be improved; and coupling the epidemiological mission with the influential role of Family Doctors (FDs) is still a challenging mission. Sentinel physicians provide support to overcome those challenges.
- Key lessons learnt from the COVID pandemic are the importance to implement a One Health approach; the need to overcome the difference between local and global concerns; and the crucial role of PHC in diagnosis, screening, triage, and monitoring activities.



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