

Cyprus health system response to Covid-19 pandemic: Reporting on the period March 2020-April 2021

Summary: Thirteen months of pandemic, found the government and the health system in Cyprus managing relatively well, especially during the first and second waves. Almost all issues related to governance and coordination of policy responses, as well as ensuring adequate physical infrastructure and workforce capacity appear to have been adequately addressed. Difficulties and problems however surfaced during the third wave that started early March 2021.

Description: Cyprus¹ was mobilised relatively early, even before the first case of Covid-19 was recorded, (9 of March), taking measures to prevent the spread of the disease. The Council of Ministers, on February 28 2020, decided to: a) activate the Crisis Management Centre, b) temporarily shut down 4 of the 8 crossing points which allow people to cross over from the occupied areas to the areas controlled by the Republic and vice versa, and c) designate accommodation facilities and other sites as areas for the isolation of suspected cases. This was immediately followed by the closure of the schools (10 of March), which very soon led to a complete lockdown. In hindsight they seem to have helped the country recover relatively quickly from the first wave, initiating relaxation measures as early as April 30, 2020.

The **governance and co-ordination of policy responses** is led at the highest level, by the President of the Republic and the Council of Ministers, while at a lower level by the Ministry of Health (MoH) and the Minister. All decisions are taken by the Council of Ministers chaired by the President of the Republic, following the recommendations of the Scientific Committee of experts, which was set-up in early March 2020. This concentrating governance in combination with the highly centralised health system facilitated the rapid decision-making, the co-ordination of specific measures and the effective mobilisation of resources.

Cyprus has been able to meet its needs ensuring **sufficient physical infrastructure and workforce capacity** by adopting several different approaches. Right from the onset of the pandemic the MoH designated a reference hospital for Covid-19 patients and restructured the public health sector by rapidly converting Intensive Care Unit (ICU) beds in other wards to respond effectively to the rising demand, while protecting the general population and healthcare workers. In addition, six public health centres commenced operation, where persons with symptoms could be referred to or walk-in.

For the timely **provision of the most needed resources**, enormous efforts were made to secure enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from China and through the Joint Procurement of the EU, combined with the use of in-kind and cash donations

¹Cyprus has been a divided island since 1974. Consequently, all data in this flash report refer to those areas of the Republic of Cyprus in which the government of Cyprus exercises effective control.

by many private companies and individuals. Also, a central management team was set up at the MoH, responsible for monitoring and ensuring the timely ordering of consumables and the adequacy of the PPE and diagnostic test kits.

To secure the **necessary numbers of health care workers**, Cyprus used a variety of different ways such as: (i) reallocation of health professionals within the public health sector, (ii) recruitments of doctors of specific specialties, (iii) recruitment of final-year medical and nursing students to support health professionals, (iv) loosening requirements and accelerating of procedures for faster recruitment of additional staff on short-term or temporary contracts, and (v) deployment of several volunteers in contact tracing, telephone inquiries, appointment scheduling for PCR testing at public health centres and home delivery of medication to elderly patients or persons with mobility problems and disabilities.

Public health sector professionals took full responsibility for tackling the pandemic, while the private sector played a supporting role in non-covid-19 cases, particularly during periods of exacerbation of the pandemic and the need for increased hospitalisation. The private sector has not so far had to treat Covid-19 patients, but it does receive a large proportion of non-Covid cases, freeing up public hospital beds. The full implementation of the new health system with most private hospitals and clinics having contracted with it has greatly facilitated this process.

Outlook & Commentary: Even though the health system was in a period of transition to a new one of universal coverage, it can be argued that Cyprus was prepared and implemented a plan to address the pandemic. It is true that the measures taken at the onset of the pandemic, probably because of a "domino effect" due to fear and urgency, may seem harsh and without sufficient scientific evidence. However, it must be taken into account that the measures were taken under conditions of excessive pressure, information scarcity and high uncertainty.

The harsh measures, including repeated lockdowns, closure of businesses and schools for long periods of time, in combination with the large numbers of tests contributed significantly to preventing the spread of the virus and maintaining low incidence and death rates per 100,000 population compared to other countries during the first and second wave of the pandemic. The small number of cases per day also helped the quick tracing of contacts, playing a key role in controlling the spread.

The relatively good epidemiological picture of Cyprus seems to have deteriorated during the third wave of the pandemic, (beginning March 2021 onwards). Despite the continuation of tough measures, the new cases remained consistently high with increasing numbers of hospitalised patients (over 300 new cases daily, and over 400 cases in the last week of April, with approximately 10% intubated in ICU). According to the last National Surveillance Report by the MoH, as of March 30, 2021, a total of 44,441 cases had been diagnosed, of which 259 died (case fatality risk: 0.6%). In the last 14 days (17-30 March 2021), 4,871 cases were diagnosed. The 14-day cumulative diagnosis rate was 548.5 per 100,000 pop. In addition, during this two-week period, 58,847 RT PCR and 573,258 rapid antigen tests have been performed

(6,626.9 RT PCR and 64,556.1 rapid antigen tests per 100,000 pop). National Surveillance Report as of 30/03/2021. Republic of Cyprus.

The successful management of the first wave of the pandemic, (early March 2020 - mid-October 2020, with an average of 10 cases per day), was accompanied by high levels of citizen satisfaction, but the situation changed drastically during the third wave period of the pandemic. In two separate surveys conducted in April and May 2020, a high percentage of Cypriots, 84% and 78% respectively, had approved the government's response to the pandemic. In a similar survey conducted in March 2021, the percentage had dropped dramatically to 38%. Citizen satisfaction survey (in Greek).

As repeatedly stated by the Minister of Health, the pandemic management strategy is based on four pillars: (i) increased testing, (ii) contact tracing, (iii) adherence to health protocols and (iv) vaccinations. It is clear though that as the course of the pandemic unfolded, circumstances were changing, thus complicating the government's work. Some key aggravating factors were citizen fatigue and non-compliance with the ongoing restrictive measures, communication with citizens, difficulties in the effective contact tracing as the number of positive cases increased, but also due to the rapid spread of the new British strain, being 50% more contagious and likely to be responsible for more serious disease. It is remarkable that during the period February 15 - March 6, the incidence rate of the British variant in Cyprus was estimated at 91%. <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/uploads/25032021--Αποτελέσματα%20αλληλούχισης%20στελεχών.pdf> (in Greek)

Despite all the hardships, the effort continues, with the sole certainty that even after thirteen months of pandemic there are still many uncertainties. The vaccination of the population can be the single most effective weapon to combat the pandemic. According to a recent press release by the MoH, up until April 3 2021, 161,526 (21.6% of the population over 15) vaccinations were administered. The 114,660 (15.3% of the population over 15) relate first dose and 46,866 (6.3% of the population over 15) to both doses.

Further reading: Republic of Cyprus, Press and Information Office, <https://www.pio.gov.cy/coronavirus/>

[Cyprus: Health System Response to Covid-19](#), WHO Regional Office and European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies, Covid-19 Health System Response Monitor.