

Joint Statement from the European Parliament Interest Group on Equitable Access to Healthcare and the Patient Access Partnership (PACT)

COVID-19 – Leaving no-one behind, now and in the future

The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark example of the public and private sector's critical role in "leaving no-one behind", how gaps in our health systems leave us all vulnerable and how the economy depends on health. This is a defining moment for all health stakeholders to demonstrate collective leadership and to make the right choices now, with a vision for a better future.

Europe continues to be one of the epicenters of a global pandemic. The rapid outbreak and spread of COVID-19 has put our societies and economies under severe strain, revealing gaping holes in our healthcare systems, and weaknesses in the EU's capacity to act and respond to one of the worst public health and humanitarian crises in recent memory. Our immediate priority should be to ensure equitable access to diagnostics, medicinal products, medical devices and personal protective equipment, paying particular attention to those at high risk of exposure, like frontline healthcare workers, other essential workers, cleaning staff, people with precarious socioeconomic or residence status, patients with chronic conditions and others who are vulnerable to exclusion.¹ Equally important should be ensuring continuation of treatments and care for patients without COVID-19. We need also to emphasise the importance of a coordinated response at EU level on COVID-19. A Pandemic does not recognize borders, and knowledge sharing, guidance and collective leadership is critical to ensuring a robust, effective response in all Member States.

Continued supply and access to treatments and care for all

Access to personal protective equipment is crucial in ensuring that health- and social care workers can carry out their vital work safely and effectively. Delivering new COVID-19 related tests, respiratory equipment such as ventilators as well as many other equipment needed in 'Intensive Care Units' is a priority for diagnosis and treatment; We welcome the combined effort and numerous initiatives of the European Commission, together with the industry, to address shortages of the needed medical technologies as swiftly as possible across the Union. Efforts have stepped up to scale up production as much as possible to meet the demand for medical supplies: e.g. by securing supply chains around the globe, and organizing the distribution of equipment via land and air freights.

The serious issue of increasing medicine shortages in the EU was already high on the agenda and is now further aggravated by the outbreak of the pandemic. One of the key concerns is the shortage of essential medicines used for the treatment of COVID-19 patients. The authorisation of existing medicines to treat patients infected with the virus threatens to lead to worldwide shortages and to significant, and potentially dangerous disruptions in access to treatment for patients with certain chronic diseases and, for whom there is no effective substitute. We urgently need coordination of actions to ensure that supplies are available and continuity of treatment is guaranteed for all patients.

¹ EPF Statement on the COVID-19 Pandemic, <https://www.eu-patient.eu/COVID-19/epf-covid-statements/epf-statement-on-the-covid-19-pandemic2/>

No country can ensure the supply of all essential medicines on their own. There must be solidarity toward countries that are hit the hardest by the outbreak. We call on EU Member States to refrain from imposing blanket export restrictions on medicines or close borders to medicines movements and welcome the efforts of the European Commission to ensure free circulation and avoid unnecessary national stockpiling.²

The COVID-19 crisis has forced all of us to think and do things differently. Telemedicine has been accelerated, and the on-going demand for viable digital solutions, such as virtual consultations is likely to rise. The use of the structural funds for investments should be stimulated to help provide equitable access and secure such health services and solutions for all citizens across regions and communities, thereby embodying the Commission's strategy on digital health.³

Future vaccines and treatments

The development of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19 will ultimately provide a long-term solution to tackling the outbreak and we need to ensure that we approach this challenge with a common EU-level coordinated response. The European Commission has already directed significant research funding to support industry's efforts to develop vaccines and effective treatments as a priority and the European Medicines Agency provides advice and support for clinical trials. Considering the contribution of public and private investment to urgently needed research, we call on all relevant stakeholders to work closely together to ensure that when new treatments and vaccines are approved they are available and affordable to all. We need to coordinate production capacities and consider using available instruments at the European level such as a joint procurement procedure in order to avoid a bidding war between Member States.

Delivering the European Health Agenda

We need to extend the solidarity, partnership and collaboration forged in the fire of the COVID-19 crisis, to an urgent, high-level strategic dialogue on Europe's research eco-system that is forward looking and fit for purpose, as well as an evidenced-based discussion on continuing to ensure the supply of medicines to patients across Europe. The ability to respond to health threats cannot be built overnight or simply switched off and on when needed.

As we slowly emerge from the crisis, we request the European Commission to deliver on previously planned initiatives, such as the Pharmaceutical strategy for Europe, the Beating Cancer Plan, patient safety, digital health, European Health Data Space, and integrated care, that are ever-more important in this current climate. Special emphasis should be placed on mental health, recognising the psychosocial impact of the crisis for many across Europe, in particular people with chronic conditions and older people.

Ensuring stronger EU capacity

We also believe that it is absolutely crucial to draw wider lessons from the current situation for a better future. The COVID-19 pandemic shows the importance of coordinated action at EU level in order to deal with cross-border public health threats. Health is not only a national matter – it is an urgent European and global health policy priority. If we want to maintain the valued achievements of decades of European integration and the “Europe of values” as

² EPF Statement: The EU needs to Guarantee the Delivery and Supply of Cross-Border Medical products during the COVID-19 Outbreak, <https://www.eu-patient.eu/COVID-19/epf-covid-statements/the-eu-needs-to-guarantee-the-delivery-and-supply-of-cross-border-medical-products-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

³ EPF Statement: Now is the Time to Protect Patients and Safeguard Access to Care, <https://www.eu-patient.eu/COVID-19/epf-covid-statements/epf-statement-on-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

referred to by European Commission President Von der Leyen⁴, we can no longer accept the very limited role of the EU in managing fundamental threats to the health of European citizens. We call for the strengthening of the competences, funding and staff resources of the The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA), and in the longer term explore the options to improve EU's capacity to counter cross-border health threats, like AMR for example, inter alia through a possible adaptation of the EU treaties."

More specifically, in order to prevent future outbreaks from becoming pandemic, it is imperative that patients, medical staff, frontline doctors, nurses and other stakeholders be involved in the design of policies/procedures and their coordination.

Timely attention needs to be given to a sustainable long-term strategy for healthcare

Finally, given the likely grave financial impact of the COVID-19 crisis on health and overall economies across Europe, there is a very real danger that patient access will be limited by cost, rather than value, in the medium and longer term. It also needs to be acknowledged and seriously considered that profound health inequalities across and within EU Member States will most likely be exacerbated. It is therefore imperative, that particular and timely attention needs to be given to the sustainability agenda and implementing universal health coverage so that European health systems will be fit for the future.

The newly formed European Parliament Interest Group on Equitable Access to Healthcare and the Patient Access Partnership commits fully to working together to address the issues raised in this statement and to drive solutions for the benefit of patients and the population at large across the European Union. Let us all stand together for a healthy, sustainable future, from European, national, regional and from local to global level.

Signed by the President and Secretary General of PACT and supported by the following Members of the European Parliament:

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⁴ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/it/speech_19_4230

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