



AS/COA
HEALTHCARE SERIES

AFTER THE PANDEMIC

**Considerations for COVID-19 Prevention and Treatment
in Latin America and the Caribbean**



AS/COA HEALTHCARE SERIES

AS/COA's Healthcare Series addresses key challenges and growing opportunities in healthcare across Latin America. The healthcare agenda covers a diverse range of topics including pharmaceuticals, food and beverages, medical devices, healthy living and wellness, technology, financing, and insurance. The aim of the Series is to promote public-private cooperation, increase awareness of medical technologies and innovation, encourage regulatory harmonization and collaboration, and share best practices in health financing.

As countries came out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the series has focused on sustainable healthcare systems, the importance of innovation and e-health in providing equitable and efficient care, and the need to re-focus on issues neglected during the pandemic, including mental health, screening, and NCDs.

The series provides a platform for COA corporate members to engage with key stakeholders on best practices in meeting the growing demand for access to quality healthcare, and creating innovative solutions that promote inclusion, competitiveness, and regional economic development. The Healthcare Series is co-chaired by Hugo Villegas of Medtronic and Felicia Knaul of the University of Miami.

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This report was prepared by Council of the Americas Senior Programs Associate Maria de Lourdes Despradel based on a series of Council-sponsored roundtables. The report's conclusions do not necessarily reflect the views of every roundtable participant. The Council is grateful to the experts for their participation, and wishes to thank the sponsors of the Healthcare Series for their support. Special thanks to COA Interns Liah Gruppelaar Caro and Patrizia Troccoli for their assistance with the report.

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INTRODUCTION

The Council of the Americas, under the auspices of its Healthcare Series, hosted four roundtable discussions around the theme, **“After the Pandemic: Considerations for COVID-19 Prevention and Treatment in Latin America and the Caribbean”** This series of roundtables focused on developing solutions related to COVID-19 and pandemic preparedness going forward.

Drawing upon these discussions to highlight key challenges and growing opportunities for consideration, this report seeks to align private sector initiatives with national public health goals. Inputs from the roundtable participants – who included academics, medical doctors, government officials, and patient voices – have been assembled into a high-level panorama to encourage regional governments to take into consideration the recommendations shared in these panels, capture the lessons learned, and ensure better coordination for future pandemic response.

The report takes as its starting point the importance of assessing takeaways from three years of the COVID-19 pandemic response and the need to be clear-eyed about the challenges that governments and the international health system face in maintaining an adequate response to ongoing COVID-19 threats, as well as in preparing for the next pandemic that experts assure us will happen. Although it is impossible to predict when the next pandemic will occur, countries must be ready. By analyzing the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and assessing lessons learned, this report provides recommendations for policymakers as they look to protect their citizens.



Participants in these roundtables agreed that countries in the region cannot simply return to a pre-COVID-19 approach. The strategies that were successfully implemented during the pandemic must be maintained. Even as the risk perception of COVID-19 fades, governments must continue to make the health of the population a priority, knowing that the consequences of inattention go far beyond health to affect the economic, social, educational, and mental wellbeing of their people.

Participants agreed that governments must take the opportunity afforded by the COVID-19 pandemic to rethink their public health strategies. Pandemic preparedness starts at the country level and the most important element in an effective government response to disease outbreaks is a strong and resilient health system. At the same time, it is clear that COVID-19 has not ceased to be a significant public health concern, and countries must meet the challenge of ensuring access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, and maintaining high vaccination rates among their populations, in the first instance by incorporating COVID-19 vaccination into routine immunization schedules. More broadly, governments must develop mechanisms for coordination across sectors and actors, and develop better plans to tackle future outbreaks more effectively.

Broadly, panelists focused on four areas of pandemic response that will be require continuing attention for successful ongoing COVID-19 prevention and treatment, and for ensuring a successful response to future health emergencies. First, messaging was and remains central to the continued acceptance by the public of COVID-19 prevention and treatment, with a special focus on equipping healthcare professionals. Second, healthcare financing in general, and the way COVID-19 vaccines and treatments are financed going forward, are critical if systems are to remain stable and capable of providing necessary treatment. Third, at a domestic and international level, it is important to create and sustain systems for collaboration among governments and institutions so that learnings are shared, and information remains accessible. Finally, in the new, post-pandemic era of COVID-19, it will be as important to maintain and expand treatment options for vulnerable populations as it will be to work on prevention of the disease. Taken together, a focus on these four areas will help ensure that COVID-19 remains a manageable threat, while preparing us for the next pandemic.

PARTICIPANT EXPERTS:

The following experts participated in one of the four roundtables.

- **Gabriela Abalos**, Regional Medical Vaccine Lead, Pfizer Inc.
- **Alejandro Alarcón López**, Medical Programs Coordinator, Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS)
- **Carlos Arturo Álvarez Moreno**, Vice President of Science and Innovation, Colsanitas Clinic
- **Gabriel Battistella**, Undersecretary of Primary, Ambulatory and Community Care, Ministry of Health of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires
- **Florencia Braga**, General Director of Projects, Argentine Alliance of Patients (ALAPA)
- **Andres Caicedo**, Vaccines Public Affairs Head LATAM, Sanofi
- **Pilar Collantes**, President, Voces Ciudadanas
- **Julio Croda**, Specialist, Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz)
- **Ana Dantas**, Vaccine's Scientific mRNA Expert for Latin America, Pfizer Inc.
- **Elizabeth Fox**, Chief Technical Leadership Officer, Pan American Development Foundation (PADF)
- **Danielle Gillerin**, Health Outreach Officer, OES's International Health and Biodefense Office, U.S. Department of State
- **John Gorkowski**, Global Health Security Team Lead, OES's International Health and Biodefense Office, U.S. Department of State
- **Jorge Kalil**, Titular Professor of Clinical Immunology and Allergy at the Faculty of Medicine, University of São Paulo
- **Renato Kfour**, First Secretary, Sociedade Brasileira de Imunizações (SBIIm)
- **Elkin Lemos**, Regional Medical Scientific Expert, Pfizer Inc.
- **Steve Liston**, Senior Director, Council of the Americas (Moderator)
- **Fernando Llorca Castro**, Former Ambassador of Costa Rica to the United States and Former Health Minister of Costa Rica
- **Santiago March**, Coordinator of New Technologies, Mexican Foundation for Health (FUNSALUD)
- **Aakash Mopal**, Senior Economist, Latin America, Health, Nutrition and Population (HNP) Global Practice, The World Bank
- **Alexandre Naime Barbosa**, Vice President, Brazilian Society of Infectology
- **José Miguel Oñate**, Infectologist, Imbanaco Medical Center
- **José Carlos Prado Júnior**, Medical Doctor, Hospital Sirio Libanes
- **Shahida Rasul**, Senior Director Marketing and Access mRNA Vaccines, Pfizer Inc.
- **Juan Pablo Torres**, Associate Professor, University of Chile
- **Cesar Ugarte-Gil**, Assistant Professor, Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia
- **Hector Villareal**, Research Professor, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey

OBSERVATIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented devastation in Latin America and the Caribbean. In addition to exacerbating the deep social and economic inequalities, panelists noted that the pandemic further weakened already fragmented health systems, exposing how ill-prepared many countries were to handle a crisis of this magnitude. When COVID-19 hit Latin America and the Caribbean, most countries in the region didn't have a health system that had the capacity to respond effectively or efficiently because of a lack of critical infrastructure. At the same time, as health services became overwhelmed by the massive demand for hospital care for COVID-19 patients, treatment of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) was neglected, which in the long-run posed a higher financial burden to the system.

Amidst the spread of COVID-19, many governments saw the need to devote a large percentage of their resources to addressing the pandemic because their space for fiscal expansion was already very limited. To respond to the effects of the pandemic, governments employed fiscal and monetary tools, including large fiscal packages to support increased health expenditures, which prompted a rise in debt levels across virtually all countries in the region.¹ Despite these measures, the pandemic had an enormous social impact particularly in terms of inequality and poverty levels, coming after several years of limited progress in social indicators. These social effects made clear the costs of a lack of investment in infrastructure and insufficient social protection of the overall system.

Panelists repeatedly stressed that assessments of the political, economic, and social effects of COVID-19 have amply demonstrated that the pandemic extended well beyond a health crisis. For this reason, it is important for governments to analyze the broader implications of health crises for national security, since it is unlikely that COVID-19 will be the last event of its kind. The pandemic not only threatened the well-being of the nation, but it also posed new strategic challenges: First, the occurrence of financial crises and recessions which further exacerbated political instability, especially when citizens felt that their government failed them by mishandling the pandemic. This discontent with government performance was reflected in subsequent elections. Moreover, the pandemic reduced citizens' trust in the health systems, in particular because of mixed messaging regarding mandates and, in some cases, attacks by politicians and the media on the credibility of leading health officials. COVID-19 disrupted global supply chains, revealing the vulnerabilities of the system, and affecting economic security. Finally, the long-term effects on the education, mental health, and social wellbeing of the next generation are only now becoming clear.

¹ "The Pandemic Is Prompting Higher Debt Levels in the Region's Countries and Jeopardizing a Sustainable Rebuilding with Equality." Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), March 11, 2021. <https://www.cepal.org/en/pressreleases/pandemic-prompting-higher-debt-levels-regions-countries-and-jeopardizing-sustainable>.

THE CENTRALITY OF MESSAGING

Shortly after the emergence of COVID-19, an unprecedented global effort was initiated to develop and deploy safe and effective vaccines to reduce the health and socio-economic impact of the pandemic. As of December 2020, more than 270 R&D efforts had been undertaken around the world to find a vaccine, with more than 60 vaccines in human trials and eight candidate vaccines approved for full or limited use in several countries, including Canada, China, Russia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States.² Cross-country and cross-organizational collaboration among the scientific community and pharmaceutical industry backed by support from multiple governments allowed for the efficient allocation of resources towards developing efficacious and safe vaccines in a timely manner, and enabled the first vaccine against COVID-19 to receive emergency use authorization less than a year after the outbreak.^{3,4} The vaccine aimed at reducing the morbidity and mortality impacts of the disease, and as a result averted the implementation of control measures and their associated economic, political and social costs.



2 Ferranna, Maddalena, J. P. Sevilla, and David E. Bloom. *Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic: Comparing alternative value frameworks*. No. w28601. National Bureau of Economic Research, 2021.

3 Pecetta, Simone, Daniel Tortorice, Francesco Berlanda Scorza, Mariagrazia Pizza, Gordon Dougan, Richard Hatchett, Steve Black, David E. Bloom, and Rino Rappuoli. "The trillion dollar vaccine gap." *Science Translational Medicine* 14, no. 638 (2022): eabn4342.

4 Sallam, Malik. "COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy worldwide: a concise systematic review of vaccine acceptance rates." *Vaccines* 9, no. 2 (2021): 160.



Countries around the world implemented COVID-19 vaccination campaigns as an ongoing effort to vaccinate large numbers of people in order to ensure protection from the disease. Achieving successful distribution, affordability, accessibility, and acceptability of the vaccine and maintaining high vaccination rates remain central challenges for the region. Despite the widespread availability of effective COVID-19 vaccines, many individuals still hesitate to get vaccinated, which has prevented countries from achieving successful immunization programs. Hesitancy around vaccination is grounded in insufficient knowledge, lack of confidence in the benefits of vaccination, or overconfidence in one's ability to avoid the disease.⁵ The World Health Organization has identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the 10 greatest threats to public health, highlighting the need to study, understand, and target this construct.⁶ Public concerns about vaccines did not start with COVID-19; however, social media has increased anxieties about vaccine safety and its regulation.⁷ The so-called “infodemic” – a wave of incorrect information and false news, transmitted mainly through social networks and the Internet – has become a threat for the management of the pandemic in general, and for vaccination campaigns in particular.⁸ False rumors have circulated widely in the region, jeopardizing the acceptability of this public health intervention. Today, many countries worldwide are struggling to increase public trust and enthusiasm to get vaccinated, especially in an anxious and complicated atmosphere.

Participants in our panels agreed that health personnel and health authorities were not able to grasp the heterogeneity of this message and craft successful strategies to gain the trust of the population. In the earliest stages of the pandemic, when vaccines

5 Trogen, Brit, and Liise-anne Pirofski. “Understanding vaccine hesitancy in COVID-19.” *Med 2*, no. 5 (2021): 498-501.

6 “Ten Threats to Global Health in 2019.” World Health Organization, n.d. <https://www.who.int/news-room/spotlight/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>.

7 Kumar, Mohan, and V. L. Surya. “Hesitancy for COVID-19 Vaccines and Its Implications for Routine Immunisation.” In *COVID-19 Vaccines-Current State and Perspectives*. IntechOpen, 2022.

8 Dreser, Anahí. “Retos y avances en la vacunación contra COVID-19 en Latinoamérica y el Caribe.” *Revista de la Universidad Industrial de Santander. Salud* 53 (2021).

were first introduced to the public, health officials failed adequately to explain that these vaccines did not prevent the transmission of the disease, but rather were designed to avoid severe infection, hospitalization, and death. This lack of effective messaging was accompanied by extensive dissemination of fake information about vaccination usage on social media platforms that widely affected the acceptance of COVID-19 vaccines. Later, the emergence of new variants led to the launch of booster vaccines, but public response has been slow, and skepticism has increased. Notably, recent data indicate a negative attitude toward booster doses even among individuals who initially completed the first round of COVID-19 vaccinations.⁹ As time passes, fewer cases of COVID-19 has led to complacency and a lower perceived need for vaccination, as despite evidence of continuing transmission, illness, and deaths, individuals perceive COVID-19 not to be a threat to their health anymore.¹⁰

When it comes to promoting COVID-19 vaccines, roundtable participants stressed the essential need to build trust among the population. This starts with health professionals. Healthcare providers are consistently ranked as the most reliable and trusted source of information on vaccines, and frequently patients who were hesitant to get vaccinated would establish dialogue with them to share their concerns and seek answers. During the pandemic, some health professionals in the region joined the anti-vaccine and anti-technology groups due to a lack of education and understanding of the disease and the vaccine. Some physicians or primary care doctors lacked a meaningful understanding of the goals of the vaccination plans so they were not able to educate the population nor help promote the aims of the vaccination campaigns. Many health professionals lacked the necessary skills to communicate effectively with general public. Together, these deficiencies among healthcare professionals fueled the overall lack of trust in the health systems, a problem further exacerbated by poor messaging from the government on the pandemic. As countries exited the pandemic, the damage to public trust in healthcare systems remains; it did indeed prove relatively easy to lose trust in the health system, but recovering trust may take years.

To combat these challenges:

- **Vaccine literacy:** Because of the ongoing need for COVID-19 vaccines, and because public health messaging is essential for building the public's confidence in vaccines, roundtable participants agreed that governments, health workers, and institutions must work together to convey timely and clear messages through trusted channels, advocating the safety and efficacy of

9 Noh, Yunha, Ju Hwan Kim, Dongwon Yoon, Young June Choe, Seung-Ah Choe, Jaehun Jung, Sang-Won Lee, and Ju-Young Shin. "Predictors of COVID-19 booster vaccine hesitancy among fully vaccinated adults in Korea: a nationwide cross-sectional survey." *Epidemiology and Health* 44 (2022): e2022061.

10 Trogen, Brit, and Liise-anne Pirofski. "Understanding vaccine hesitancy in COVID-19." *Med* 2, no. 5 (2021): 498-501.

currently available COVID-19 vaccines. Since these agents need to be at the forefront of efforts to combat COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy, they also need to be constantly educated on the progress of the disease in order to ensure they give a clear message across. Governments need to invest in constant efforts to engage with the public to assess vaccine literacy and ensure that their concerns are addressed.

- **Booster shots:** Some patients consider booster shots unnecessary and see more risks than benefits in getting these additional doses. To increase COVID-19 vaccination, particularly booster shots, it is important for the public to understand that they are not merely reinforcements of the vaccines that patients have already received, but rather target the latest COVID-19 variants and help maintain strong protection against the virus. Health communication strategies and programs should focus on reducing concerns surrounding COVID-19 booster vaccines, such as safety, efficacy, and side effects. Finally, several participants commented it is important for countries in the region to incorporate the COVID-19 vaccine into routine immunization schedules in order to simplify and standardize the process and ensure increased protection of the population.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FINANCING

One of the key challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic has been ensuring the financing necessary to craft and maintain an adequate response. Ensuring equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccine is a critical priority for bringing the pandemic to an end. As the region looks to the post-pandemic phase of the COVID-19 response and prepares for future pandemics, panelists repeatedly noted how important it is to analyze the range of financing challenges in the region and how the public, private, and multilateral sectors can work together to sustain the financing health systems will need.

Before the first cases of COVID-19 were reported, health systems of the region were already underfunded and highly fragmented, which made the region more vulnerable to the pandemic. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO)¹¹ recommends that governments in Latin America and the Caribbean invest at least 6 percent of GDP in health; however, only Cuba and Uruguay met this number. Currently, there is a big discrepancy between health infrastructure available in the region and the level that is actually needed.

¹¹ “ECLAC and Paho: Controlling the Pandemic Requires Convergence and Coordination between Health, Economic, Social and Productive Policies.” PAHO/WHO | Pan American Health Organization, July 30, 2020. <https://www.paho.org/en/news/30-7-2020-eclac-and-paho-controlling-pandemic-requires-convergence-and-coordination-between>.

When the pandemic hit, countries in the region did not have the fiscal space to respond to the pandemic, which resulted in inadequate financing to sustain a coordinated strategy. Once vaccines arrived, the region faced the challenge of equitable vaccine distribution. The absence of a comprehensive approach to ensure and sustain access to COVID-19 vaccines in developing countries delayed the global recovery. Mechanisms like COVAX indisputably helped get vaccines to countries that otherwise could not have purchased them, but it fell short on the promises it made to the countries in Latin America and the Caribbean.

When vaccines arrived, many countries were already highly indebted. On top of that, pandemic-related disruptions were compounded by other exogenous issues like the war in Ukraine, which roiled food and energy markets. As the risk perception of the pandemic has declined, the result has been that governments around the world have begun allocating money from their budget toward priorities other than COVID-19 vaccines and treatments. Many roundtable participants stressed that the private and multilateral sectors have the challenge of working with the governments to find practical solutions to provide more flexibility in the budget for financing immunizations without sacrificing the current healthcare system's needs.

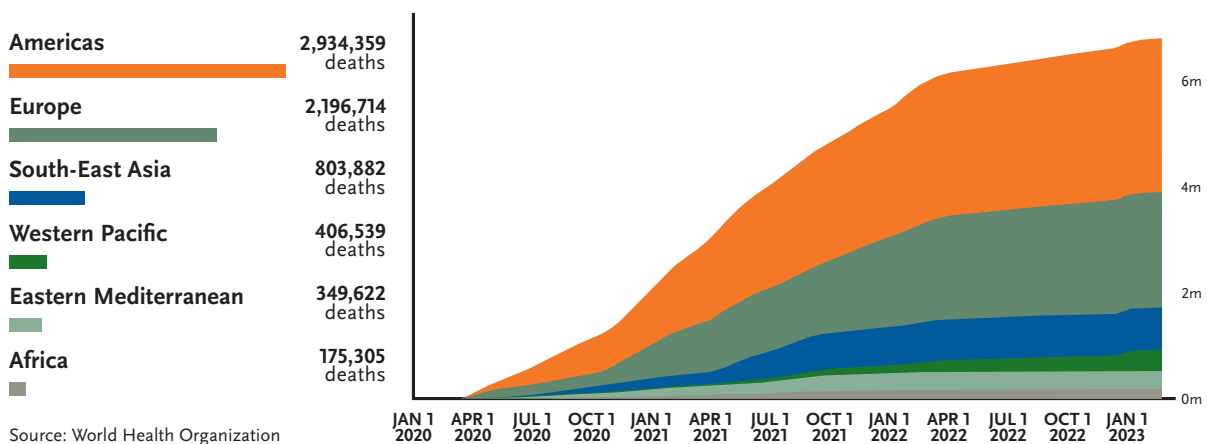
To combat these challenges:

- As countries enter a new, post-pandemic state of COVID-19 prevention and treatment, and as the COVID-19 vaccines start being incorporated into routine immunization schedules, countries will need to start thinking about sustainable financing for immunizations within the framework of overall health financing. There is an opportunity to use innovative financing mechanism to fund COVID-19 vaccines, particularly health taxation, vaccine bonds, and advanced market commitments.
- Countries in the region need to rethink financing for health, especially in critical areas of both non-communicable diseases and pandemic preparedness and prevention. Financing structures need to allow for procyclical financing in good times and for countercyclical financing in bad times.
- Mechanisms are needed to ensure the affordability and sustainable financing of COVID-19 vaccines in low-income and middle-income countries. For this, it's crucial that governments coordinate health policies with economic, social, and productive policies.

THE CRITICAL NEED FOR INTER-GOVERNMENTAL AND INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, many experts reflected on a previous public health crisis, the influenza pandemic of 1918. At that time, many medical and scientific professionals desperately searched for an effective vaccine but to no avail. After this experience, there have been substantial efforts to increase awareness of the effectiveness that vaccines and other drug treatments have for controlling the spread of diseases. Modern medical knowledge allowed that when the first cases of COVID-19 were reported, there was already massive scientific research that allowed for rapid development of vaccines thanks to decades of research and innovation. Another important lesson drawn from 1918 was the need for communication and cooperation to slow the spread of the disease. However, the initial response to COVID-19 in the region reflected shortfalls in cooperation and coordination.

Panel experts noted that many governments had difficulty organizing an effective response to the pandemic due to fragmentation between and within public systems. The decentralized and uncoordinated regional crisis management, as well as the lack of collaboration between government agencies and institutions in designing containment policies resulted in devastating health outcomes and caused significant spillovers to other sectors. Overall, the initial regional response to the pandemic was inadequate and outdated as some governments failed to coordinate their decisions, resulting in weak crisis management and the loss of many lives that could have been saved. Due to the level of uncertainty and complexity, the COVID-19 pandemic required prompt action from governments and demanded a complex and highly organized response that included the input and expertise of multiple actors across different sectors. This type of collaboration allows governments to pool resources, knowledge, and expertise from across levels and areas, and encourages agencies to work together in new ways to tackle this shared problem.¹²



12 Cyr, Jennifer, Matías Bianchi, Lucas González, and Antonella Perini. “Governing a pandemic: Assessing the role of collaboration on Latin American responses to the COVID-19 crisis.” *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 13, no. 3 (2021): 290-327.

To combat these challenges:

In general, there is a need for international leadership to capture learnings across countries and stakeholders, systematize response, ensure adequate financing, and prevent harmful short-term actions. International authorities should work together to create repositories of experiences allowing governments and institutions to exchange information between countries.

- Moving forward, regional leadership needs to capture learnings across countries and stakeholders, systematize response, ensure adequate financing, and prevent harmful short-term actions.
- At a national level, countries need to create multidisciplinary and multi-ministry working groups to capture lessons learned and ensure better coordination in future, seeking to prevent the worst health, economic, and social consequences of future pandemics.
- There needs to be more collaboration between the ministries of finance and the ministries of health. Particularly, the ministries of health have to start thinking about more issues of design and financing.
- The protocols developed during the pandemic should be transferred and adopted to respond to other medical problems.

On the other hand, coordinated approaches to crisis management have been praised for leading consistent crisis responses which were essential to contain the virus. Roundtable participants shared best practices that were later developed in some countries in the region that are worth analyzing to extrapolate to other countries and sectors.

ARGENTINA

In some countries in the region, strategies were shared among sectors and for the first time, the ministries of health played a crucial role. For instance, the Ministry of Health of Argentina was the entity responsible for consolidating a response strategy that was shared with other sub-sectors of the government. This cross-sectoral collaboration was very favorable for achieving a coordinated and integrated response to the pandemic. The country also integrated local organizations, non-profit organizations, political parties, among others, into the pandemic response strategy, which resulted in a very positive interaction.

COLOMBIA

Another case that showed positive collaboration between sectors was in Colombia. The Colombian scientific societies partnered to develop a management guide that would allow medical doctors to optimize and standardize the response to the disease. These documents included practical guidelines, using scientific evidence, on how the health sector had to effectively respond to the ongoing.

Additionally, once Colombians started to get vaccinated, the scientific society worked on building a local epidemiology that included data on the effects of the vaccines and its impact on the communities, but also, with the support of the National Institute of Health, developed molecular epidemiology so that diagnosis could be made throughout the country so that scientists could continue studying and evaluating the disease and identify variants.

THE NEED TO ADVANCE TREATMENT IN THE NEW ERA OF COVID-19

Beyond vaccines, experts warn that governments and the medical community cannot let their guard down regarding treatment of COVID-19, which continues to circulate and mutate. Although there are already treatments available that can protect people at high risk for severe illness from COVID-19, especially those with underlying health conditions, roundtable participants noted that these treatments have remained out of reach for people in low-income and middle-income countries due to disparities in access and trust in these antivirals. There is a need to promote these treatments and inform the medicals professionals and the general public about the benefits that these can have to mitigating the risk of the disease. Before treatments can be accessible to the public, governments need to improve research, technology, and digital transformation to increase vaccine literacy and shift current paradigms about COVID-19. Once vaccine literacy improves, the focus should shift to building an effective infrastructure that enables the rapid distribution of treatment to high-risk patients.

In addition, it is essential to continue researching and developing treatments that reduce the inflammatory response and develop antivirals that help stop the spread of the virus inside the body and help the immune system fight off the infection. There is

a need to better understand how COVID-19 behaves in the future to mitigate its effects effectively by using genomic surveillance tools and molecular diagnostics to track mutations and active variants. Furthermore, identifying high-risk populations is crucial for preventing the spread of the virus. There is still a need for further improvements in tracking the virus and in the development of anti-viral treatment to help minimize the prolonged symptoms experienced by vulnerable patients who are likely to suffer the most from the future development of the virus.

Finally, roundtable participants discussed the importance of early recognition and rapid diagnosis of COVID-19 to prevent transmission and provide supportive care in a timely manner. It is essential to reduce the time from symptom onset to diagnosis and treatment by having adequate strategies to increase diagnosis capacities. Particularly, ensuring broad availability of diagnostic testing, expanding the network of public and private laboratories, and ensuring rapid development and approval of diagnostic tests.

It is tempting, after three years of pandemic, for policymakers, professionals, and the public alike to want to return to a semblance of pre-pandemic normalcy and to focus on the myriad issues that were pushed aside, or even exacerbated, by the COVID-19 pandemic. Roundtable participants made clear that this would be a mistake. First, because too much has been learned that we cannot afford to lose. We must capture these lessons and build stronger healthcare systems on the basis of these learnings. Second, because too much has already been lost for us to become complacent, in terms of millions of lives, billions of dollars, and uncounted social ills. We dare not put COVID-19 vaccine regimens aside, nor treatment of those who suffer its effects. Rather, we must continue to integrate what we have learned and the vaccines and treatments we have developed, into the standard healthcare protocols of this new COVID-19 era, using our ongoing efforts on COVID-19 not only to improve our citizens' wellbeing today, but to prepare for the unforeseen health challenges that are certain to follow.





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