

## How did the COVID-19 pandemic change paediatric primary care? Results of a European primary care survey

Gottfried Huss, Christine Magendie ECPCP  
(European Confederation of Primary Care Paediatricians)

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected heavily the adult population. Children so far have not been affected to a great extent. However, during the first wave of the pandemic, COVID-19 had a pronounced indirect impact on health services for children and changed the daily practice of paediatric primary care.

In summer 2020, ECPCP performed a survey among its delegates. The objective of the survey was to describe the most important changes of the daily routine and functioning of paediatric primary care practices in Europe. We received responses from 137 primary care paediatricians from 15 countries: Italy, Germany, Israel, Spain, Slovenia, France, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovakia, Turkey, Austria, Switzerland, Finland, Czech Republic, Portugal. This cross-sectional survey is not representative for the entire spectrum of ambulatory pediatric care in all 27 EU countries. The evaluation of the questionnaire was done solely under a European perspective, a comparison of countries was not intended.

### Results

#### 1. Are you working in primary care?

95% of the respondents are working in primary care.

#### 2. Did you and your practice team experience distress, suffering and anxiety as consequence of the pandemic?

3 % reported very serious negative psychological effects that caused them to stop their activities. 36% complained about important and 56% about few negative psychological effects.

#### 3. How did you adjust in your daily routine during lockdown? (Column A )

#### 4. Which changes in your paediatric practice will you probably maintain during the next 12 months? (Column B )

Measure	A Present Question 3	B Future Question 4
Systematic use of personal protective equipment (PPE)	95%	92%
Limitation of accompanying persons	92%	74%
More consultations by phone	90%	77%
Discouragement to present patients with minor illness	76%	66%
“Empty waiting room”- policy	76%	57%
No “walk-in” patients	62%	50%

Separated attendance hours for infectious and non-infectious patients	61%	62%
Separated rooms for infectious and non-infectious patients	60%	57%
More video consultations	59%	53%
Prioritization of well infant checks and vaccination	50%	28%
Restriction of well infant checks and vaccination	39%	4%

**5. Please estimate by what proportion your consultations have dropped during the peak of the pandemic in your country compared to the same period in 2019.**

3 %	no change
9 %	< 20 % reduction
33%	20 - 40% reduction
27%	40 - 60% reduction
21 %	60 - 80 % reduction
7 %	above 80% reduction

**6. Please estimate by what proportion your practice revenue has dropped during the peak of the pandemic in your country?**

16 %	no change
21 %	< 20 % reduction
28 %	20 - 40% reduction
21 %	40 - 60% reduction
10 %	60 - 80 % reduction
5 %	above 80% reduction

**7. Do you expect to receive some sort of financial support from the government?**

66 % do not expect financial support from their government. 34% hope that their government will give support.

**8. Did you experience problems in the provision of personal protective equipment for you and your assistants during the first weeks off the pandemic?**

9 %	no difficulties
29 %	moderate shortages
46 %	serious shortages
23 %	enduring problems
24 %	inappropriate equipment
30 %	exaggerated pricing

**9. Do you perform naso-pharyngeal swabs for Sars-Cov2 RT PCR in your practice since these tests have been more widely available?**

Never	50 %
Rarely 1 – 10 times / month	19 %
Sometimes 1 – 10 times / week	19 %
Often - at least once a day	13 %

**10. According to which signs and symptoms do you test children in your country, if no common pathology (such as otitis media, Strep A infection, UTI, Herpangina etc.) has been identified? (multiple answers possible)**

Cough	77 %
Anosmia	74 %
Pneumonia (any)	72 %
Fever (any)	66 %
Fever > 5 days	61 %
Diarrhea	50 %
Sore throat	35 %
Rhinitis	25 %
Vomiting	25 %
Conjunctivitis	19 %
Irritability	14 %
Tachycardia	10 %

**11. Which anamnestic criteria require the performance of a naso-pharyngeal swab in children in your country?**

COVID-19 case in household	89%
Return from a country with high incidence	69%
COVID-19 case in day care	66 %

**12. Do you do Sars-Cov2 RT PCR testing on parents' request without typical symptoms in the child?**

Frequently	6 %
Always	2 %
Never	43 %
Seldomly (in high-risk situations)	50%

**13. Do you do Sars-Cov2 RT PCR testing on day care or school request without typical symptoms in the child?**

Frequently	5 %
Always	1 %
Never	60 %
Seldomly (in high-risk situations)	35 %

**14. What is your personal opinion about testing for children in your country?**

There should be more testing	41 %
There should be less testing	19 %
Testing frequency is just right	40 %

**15. Please estimate the decrease in vaccination coverage for infants under and over 2 years in your country since the start of the pandemic?**

Decrease in estimated percentage	< 2 years	> 2 years
No decrease	18 %	14 %
1 – 10 %	39 %	29 %
11- 20 %	19 %	17 %
21- 30 %	14 %	17 %
31- 40 %	8 %	11 %
41- 50%	1 %	5 %
> 50 %	2 %	8 %

**16. What are/were the main challenges for vaccination uptake?**

General fear to vaccinate in “Corona – times”	29 %
Families fear to leave the house during lockdown	49 %
Difficulties of providing appointments in the practice	14 %

**17. Are you aware of recent outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases in your country?**

19 % responded yes, 81 % no. Examples: measles and pertussis

**18. Are you aware of delayed presentations of serious or life- threatening diseases to the health system in your country?**

40 % responded yes, 60 % no

**Which diseases are presented late?**

- Diabetic Ketoacidosis
- Hematological and oncological disease
- Appendicitis, peritonitis
- Child abuse
- Serious bacterial infections such as urinary tract infection, meningitis, pneumonia
- Delayed access to urgent intervention services
- Acute cardiac problems
- More severe presentations in the emergency room

**19. Are you likely to give the flu vaccine to more of your patients in this fall/ winter?**

86 % responded yes, 4 % no, 10% I don't know.

**20. Did you personally observe an impact of lockdown on children?  
(Multiple answers possible.)**

Increasing use of electronic media	96 %
Lack of physical activity	77 %
Anxiety	68 %
Parents dedicated more valuable time for their children	61 %
Increase in BMI	61 %
Behavioral problems	55 %
Increasing gap / inequities between poor and wealthy families	50 %
Accentuated learning difficulties	48 %
Sleep disorders	45 %
Serious school difficulties / school drop-out	27 %
Breakage of familiar cohesion	19 %

**21. Should all children go back to their classrooms? Please choose the answer that best reflects your personal opinion.**

Yes, education is essential for health and well-being of children	49 %
Only if adequate personal protection can be guaranteed	27 %
Yes, because children do not play a big role in the pandemic	15 %
No on-site schooling would be irresponsible	5 %
On-site schooling only for children < 10 years	2 %

**22. Have the statements about the Covid-19 pandemic from European Paediatric Organizations been useful for you?**

72 % responded yes, 28 % no

**23. Did you forward the statements to your national colleagues?**

65 % responded yes, 35 % no

**24. What else do you expect from European professional organizations with regard to the pandemic?**

- Share experiences and evidence-based publications on Covid-19 in children
- Collect information about situation in all European countries
- Overview which measures work and are implemented in other countries
- Information on epidemiological data
- Common guidelines to care for children, simple and unified recommendations for safe and efficient primary care practice under COVID-19 conditions
- Comparison of regulations and measures implemented in other countries

- Help to put the well-being of children in the focus of politicians, deserves more influence in politics
- Guidelines for returning to school safely

## 26. What is in your opinion the most important learning lesson?

### General comments

- *You think that you know everything, but there is still a lot to learn.*
- *More attention should be paid to the protection of fewer and fewer health care workers.*
- *We are all vulnerable and fragile.*
- *Life is short and surprising.*
- *I see it as a wake- up call that we have to change radically in order to preserve the planets health i.e. healthy people on a healthy planet.*

### About politicians

- *The great fight for the importance of personal protective equipment was exhausting. In the early stage our authorities have denied the potential of personal protection because of shortage of face masks.*
- *We feel very angry with the politicians.*
- *Management of the pandemic needs a bigger investment in primary care, not only on improvement of hospitals and intensive care.*
- *Authorities should speak in one voice and should abstain from their personal opinions.*

### Practice setting

- *Daily practice and structure of primary care changed dramatically in a few days as needed without losing the professional quality of the work.*
- *Telemedicine gets more important every day and changes the traditional primary care paediatrics.*

### Parents and families

- *We have solidarity in our society and as doctors we are very close to families to give advice and help them to stay rational and do the right things.*
- *The most important lesson will be that parents could overuse the health systems with minor infections. As the restrictions have been lifted parents are back to the same track. I am afraid that people did not learn very much.*
- *Before the pandemic there were a lot of unnecessary visits to the doctors. Now we see that parents can handle a lot of mild conditions.*
- *Parental responsibility is more pronounced than it was before.*

The authors thank for all contributions from the country delegates and friends.