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FEATURED Q&A

Will Covid Change How Latin America Offers Health Care?



Experts say the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare inequalities in access to medical care in Latin America and the Caribbean. // File Photo: Hospital Angeles Mexico.

Q Latin America and the Caribbean will experience a “tsunami of demand going forward” for treatment of noncommunicable diseases, such as cardiovascular disease and cancer, which have been delayed or missed due to the pandemic, **Rifat Atun, a professor of Global Health Systems at Harvard University, said at an Inter-American Dialogue event on Nov. 4. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened inequality in access to health care in the region, said Atun, who added that the region needs more innovation in health care delivery. What kind of innovation is needed to help ensure that patients in Latin America and the Caribbean get the care they need for noncommunicable diseases? How efficient and effective is public spending on health care currently? How can governments and the private sector better collaborate to maximize the value that is received from health care spending?**

A **Jaana Remes, economist and partner at the McKinsey Global Institute:** “At the McKinsey Global Institute, we spent the past year researching what it would take to make the world’s population healthier. We found that prevention is key. By using the tools already at hand, the disease burden in Latin America and the Caribbean could be reduced by 37 percent by 2040. This would result in large economic benefits for the region. We calculate a GDP boost of 8 percent by 2040, adding 0.4 percent growth year-on-year. We found that two-thirds of the reduction in the disease burden would come from prevention, for example, dietary and behavioral changes, education and weight management to reduce cardiovascular disease and diabetes, as

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

At Least Eight Killed as Iota Hits Central America

At least eight people were killed in Nicaragua and on the Colombian island of Providencia as powerful Hurricane Iota slammed Central America. The storm struck areas that were already devastated by Hurricane Eta two weeks ago.

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BUSINESS

U.S. Gives Chevron Until June to End Operations in Venezuela

The U.S. Treasury allowed Chevron until June 3 to wind down its joint ventures in Venezuela.

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POLITICAL

U.S. Justice Dept. Dropping Charges Against Mexico's Cienfuegos

The U.S. Justice Department said Tuesday that it was dropping its case against former Mexican Defense Minister Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda and that it would return him to Mexico.

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Cienfuegos // File Photo: Mexican Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

U.S. Drops Charges Against Ex-Mexican Defense Minister

The U.S. Justice Department on Tuesday agreed to drop criminal charges against former Mexican Defense Minister Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos Zepeda, who was arrested last month in the United States. "In recognition of the strong law enforcement partnership between Mexico and the United States, and in the interests of demonstrating our united front against all forms of criminality, the U.S. Department of Justice has made the decision to seek dismissal of the U.S. criminal charges against former Secretary Cienfuegos, so that he may be investigated and, if appropriate, charged, under Mexican law," U.S. Attorney General William Barr and his Mexican counterpart, Alejandro Gertz Manero, said in a joint statement released by the U.S. Justice Department. "At the request of the Fiscalía General de la República, the U.S. Department of Justice, under the treaty that governs the sharing of evidence, has provided Mexico evidence in this case and commits to continued cooperation, within that framework, to support the investigation by Mexican authorities." Cienfuegos, who was Mexico's defense chief for six years under then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, was arrested Oct. 15 at Los Angeles International Airport on charges of "conspiracy to manufacture, import and distribute narcotics into the United States and money laundering," the joint statement said. The decision to drop the charges against Cienfuegos and return him to Mexico was a major twist in one of the highest-profile drug cases in recent years. Mexican officials have not committed to putting him on trial when he returns, The Washington Post reported Tuesday. Federal prosecutors in Brooklyn, N.Y., had charged Cienfuegos with accepting bribes from the H-2 drug cartel, which is based in the Mexican states of Nayarit and Sinaloa, NBC News reported. The government of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador saw Cienfuegos' arrest as a violation of Mexico's

sovereignty. However, the U.S. Justice Department's decision to drop the charges also raises questions about the trade-offs between U.S. investigations into drug trafficking in Mexico and attempts by the United States to maintain its relationship with Mexico, The Washington Post reported. A U.S. federal judge is expected to formally drop the charges against Cienfuegos this morning, after which Cienfuegos is expected to be flown back to Mexico.

At Least Eight Killed as Iota Tears Across Central America

At least eight people have been killed after Hurricane Iota pounded Nicaragua Monday night and then plowed west into Honduras and El Salvador on Tuesday, UPI reported. Nicaragua's first lady and vice president, Rosario Murillo, said Tuesday that four adults and two minors had been killed. Colombian President Iván Duque said two people were killed and at least one was missing on the Colombian island of Providencia, which lies off Nicaragua's east coast, EFE reported. The 17-square kilometer island was almost completely devastated by the powerful hurricane. "We have a severe impact on the infrastructure, it is true—we have destruction of a large part of the housing infrastructure," said Duque, EFE reported. Iota made landfall in Nicaragua late Monday as a Category 4 hurricane with winds of 155 miles an hour, UPI reported. That force made Iota the strongest tropical cyclone of this year's Atlantic hurricane season and also the strongest hurricane on record to hit Nicaragua in November, Philip Klotzbach, a meteorologist at Colorado State University, said in a tweet. Iota has been hitting some of the same areas that were battered by Hurricane Eta two weeks ago, including some locations that are still flooded, the Associated Press reported. Eta killed more than 200 people in Central America and displaced thousands of residents, The Wall Street Journal reported. The back-to-back hurricanes are likely to produce "potentially catastrophic" mudslides and flooding, the U.S. National Hurricane Center said. "This is a

NEWS BRIEFS

Sagasti Sworn in as Peru's President, Calls for Calm

Centrist legislator Francisco Sagasti was sworn in Tuesday as Peru's interim president, a day after Congress selected him as the country's third president in a week, Reuters reported. In taking office, Sagasti called for calm amid Peru's political crisis. "It is absolutely necessary to remain calm, but do not confuse this with passivity, conformity or resignation," Sagasti told Congress. Lawmakers' ouster of President Martín Vizcarra on Nov. 9 sparked deadly street protests, and Vizcarra's replacement, Manuel Merino, was in office just five days before resigning on Sunday. Vizcarra is to serve until the president elected next April takes office in July. [Editor's note: See [Q&A](#) in Tuesday's Advisor.]

Argentine President Reading Bill to Legalize Abortion

Argentine President Alberto Fernández plans to present a bill to Congress that would legalize abortion, one of his campaign promises, BBC News reported Tuesday. Fernández says the measure will help save lives, citing the statistic that nearly 40,000 women are treated in hospitals every year due to unsafe illegal abortions. Argentina currently allows abortion only in cases of rape or if the mother's health is in danger.

Colombia's GDP Contracts 9 Percent in Third Quarter

Colombia's gross domestic product contracted by 9 percent in the third quarter as compared to the same period last year, the government said Tuesday, a larger decline than predicted, Reuters reported. Analysts had expected a contraction of 8.7 percent. However, the reported figure was an improvement from the second quarter, which saw the country's worst GDP fall in at least decades due to coronavirus-related lockdowns, of 15.8 percent.

disaster, there are roofs of homes flying in the air, fallen walls, homes that are falling apart," Francisco Chow, an official from Yatama, a Nicaraguan Indigenous political party, told The Wall Street Journal. "We can't tell yet just how bad the damage is, but we'll know more soon." On Tuesday morning, Guillermo González, the head of Nicaragua's disaster relief agency, said *lota* had torn roofs off houses, had snapped trees and taken down utility poles in northeastern Nicaragua. The country's national power company said some 160,000 homes were without power, including 114,000 along the Caribbean coast. As *lota* moved west, it weakened but still posed the threat of flash flooding and mudslides, according to the U.S. National Hurricane Center. As of 3 a.m. Central Time today, the storm was located about 55 miles east of San Salvador, moving west-southwest, and with maximum sustained winds of 35 miles an hour, the hurricane center said. [Editor's note: See related [Q&A](#) in Monday's Advisor.]

BUSINESS NEWS

U.S. Allows Chevron to Operate in Venezuela Until June

The U.S. Treasury on Tuesday reissued a license allowing Chevron to temporarily continue operations in Venezuela, the last major U.S. oil company whose business in the Andean country remains. The license gives Chevron until June 3 to wind down its joint ventures in Venezuela. The license also applies to other firms including Halliburton and Schlumberger. Chevron has had a special U.S. operating license exempting it from sanctions on Venezuelan state oil company PDVSA since January, but the latest waiver was set to expire on Dec. 1. Even with the license, the companies' operations in Venezuela are limited, as they are not authorized to drill, sell, ship or trade Venezuelan oil. They also cannot repair or improve wells, hire additional staff or services, pay dividends to PDVSA or negotiate any new loans, Reuters reported.

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well as smoking cessation, which could reduce cancer. Prevention would translate into significant health benefits. For example, a 65-year-old in 2040 could be as healthy as a 55-year-old today, infant mortality would decline, and the health-inequity gap would

“By using the tools already at hand, the disease burden in Latin America and the Caribbean could be reduced by 37 percent by 2040.”

— Jaana Remes

narrow. That does not mean capturing these benefits would be easy. It requires reorienting thinking about and investing in health and health care delivery, as well as fostering healthier living conditions and changing behavior. It also requires changes in the workplace and economic policy to allow, among other things, increased participation of older people in the work force. However tragic and destructive it has been, Covid-19 has placed society at a unique point in time to prioritize health. Could there be a better moment to invest in health to promote well-being and prosperity?”

A Rolf Hoenger, area head for Latin America at Roche Pharma: “Covid-19 has shown that health systems in Latin America are not prepared to meet the needs of their populations, exacerbating the existing challenges that systems face to provide access to quality care for all patients. Health system fragmentation, an absence of quality data and a lack of investment in health and innovation are some of the challenges that hinder effective prevention programs and optimal diagnosis and treatment, generating high out-of-pocket costs and inequities in access to care. The pandemic has clearly shown

that health is an essential part of social and economic development and has reinforced the need for more and better investment in health to ensure people's well-being and promote sustainable health systems. Digital solutions, for example, can support access to quality health data that will allow governments and the private sector to understand where the most pressing needs are to ensure resources are being allocated where they are needed most. This data will also allow us to understand the effectiveness of existing medicines as well as inform the development of future treatments, making investment in innovation more efficient. We have an opportunity today to build on the collaborative spirit we are seeing to promote more public-private partnerships. By joining knowledge, capabilities and resources, we can develop the right solutions to ensure quality care and access to innovations for all patients. At Roche, we want to be part of the solution and invite all stakeholders to have an open line of communication with us, so we continue to identify ways to collaborate.”

A Arachu Castro, Samuel Z. Stone Chair of Public Health in Latin America at Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine: “The Covid-19 pandemic exposes the limitations of Latin American and Caribbean health systems, the strengthening of which cannot continue to wait or depend exclusively on the budgets allocated during the pandemic. The political instability that preceded the outbreak of the pandemic in countries where the population demanded more redistributive and fair social policies, together with the devastating impact of the pandemic, create the ideal conditions for governments to justify spending 6 percent of their GDP on health—the recommendation that the Directing Council of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) made in 2014. PAHO also suggests that 30 percent of this budget be allocated to primary health care (PHC). Strong PHC systems can solve,

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in close proximity to the population, most of their health conditions—including emergencies and noncommunicable diseases—as well as develop health promotion and disease prevention measures, in coordination with specialized health services through reference and counter-reference health systems. In addition to helping to improve the coverage of services more equitably, a solid and quality PHC protects the population from catastrophic health expenses.”

A **María del Rocío Sáenz Madrigal, head of the Public Health Department in the School of Medicine at the National Autonomous University of Mexico and former health minister of Costa Rica:** “Covid-19 reached Latin America, the most unequal region in the world, amid an unfavorable economic context. The pain and suffering of thousands of people quickly spread throughout the region. This included health workers and showed the deep inequalities in which various population groups live. The foregoing has shown the need to improve living conditions, to consider the social effects on women, to strengthen primary health

care, as well as to promote more participation and decision-making based on facts and science. Having diagnostic devices and treatments for everyone, at reasonable and accessible prices, is essential. Patient

“Covid-19 reached Latin America, the most unequal region in the world, amid an unfavorable economic context.”

— María del Rocío Sáenz Madrigal

navigation programs, within health systems, are a nondrug innovation that provides vision and collaboration of peers, NGOs and academia, in the control and monitoring of diseases such as breast cancer. All this can help offer timely, continuous and quality services.”

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta at gkuleta@thedialogue.org.

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Colombian President Iván Duque Márquez

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