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FEATURED Q&A

How Has Covid-19 Forced Health Care to Restructure?



The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a restructuring of health services in Latin America and the Caribbean, according to a report by ECLAC and PAHO. The San Juan de Dios hospital in Santiago is pictured. // File Photo: Carlos Figueroa via Creative Commons.

Q The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a reorganization of health services across Latin America and the Caribbean. Among the most worrisome trends has been an increased disruption of essential primary health services, ECLAC and PAHO said in a joint report last month. This trend has harmed the well-being of individuals and communities, and is having serious repercussions for economic performance and social development in the region, the report added. What are the most important ways—negative or positive—that health systems and services in the region are being reorganized as a result of the pandemic? What types of investments in health services would lead to better economic and social conditions? What tools or best practices, such as diagnostics or data-sharing technologies, hold the most promise for the region's recovery? How can these be used to address the Covid-19 Omicron variant, and what obstacles stand in the way of making the most of them?

A Jarbas Barbosa, assistant director, and James Fitzgerald, director of health systems and services, both at the Pan American Health Organization: "The surge in health systems required to tackle Covid-19 in the Americas has resulted in a major reorganization of health services. Some countries in Latin America had to double capacity at the tertiary care level to address overwhelming needs in critical care, while struggling to ensure access to personal protective equipment, oxygen, essential medicines for intubation and, more recently, Covid-19 vaccines. The shift in focus and resource allocation including task shifting within the health work force, combined with

Continued on page 3

TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Colombian Riot Police Need 'Transformation': United Nations

Colombia's anti-riot police need a "profound transformation" to prevent them from using excessive force against protesters, the United Nations said in a report.

Page 2

POLITICAL

U.S., Mexico Begin Work on Security Framework

The U.S. and Mexican governments started work on a new framework that will govern the countries' security partnership and replace the 13-year-old Mérida Initiative.

Page 2

ECONOMIC

Chile's Central Bank Hikes Key Rate by 1.25%

Chile's central bank, led by Mario Marcel, hiked its benchmark interest rate by 125 basis points to 4 percent, continuing a tightening cycle as inflation remained above policymakers' target.

Page 3



Marcel // File Photo: Chilean Central Bank.

POLITICAL NEWS

U.N. Urges ‘Profound Transformation’ in Colombia Riot Police

Colombia’s anti-riot police need a “profound transformation” to prevent them from using excessive force against protesters, the United Nations said in a report released today, The Washington Post reported. Colombian police officers were responsible for 28 deaths during months-long protests this year in the South American country, according to the report by the U.N. human rights agency. Through the use of “unnecessary” and excessive force, officers violated demonstrators’ rights to peacefully gather, the report said. The incidents show the need to reform Colombia’s militarized police force, which reports to the Ministry of Defense, the report added. “A key element of that reform is putting police under civilian authority,” Juliette de Rivero, a representative of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia, told The Washington Post. “Colombia is now a post-conflict country. In a context of a transition to peace, it is important that the civilian and non-military character of public security functions be reinforced,” she added. The report followed Monday’s release of a U.N.-backed report that Bogotá’s city government had commissioned. That report said Colombian police officers killed at least 11 people during September 2020 protests that were sparked by officers’ beating death of a taxi driver. Following this year’s protests, Colombian President Iván Duque announced a series of reforms, including the creation of a human rights directorate within the country’s National Police force. “These reforms don’t go far enough,” Adam Isacson, director for defense oversight at the Washington Office on Latin America, told the Advisor in a [Q&A](#) published June 17. “The most overdue change is to end, after 68 years, the National Police’s location within the Defense Ministry,” he added. Duque’s government has also launched at least 231 internal investigations into alleged offenses by police, including 16 homicide probes and

108 for abuse of authority, The Washington Post reported. Most of the investigations are now closed, though 38 continue, the newspaper reported. In a statement, the National Police said it rejects violence and “is always clear about the duty to protect the life and integrity of people.” The police force added that it is developing a policy that includes emphasis on respecting human rights and protesters’ rights to peacefully assemble.

U.S., Mexican Gov’ts Begin Work on New Security Framework

U.S. and Mexican government officials began work Tuesday on a new partnership that will govern the countries’ security relationship and replace the 13-year-old Mérida Initiative, the Associated Press reported. The U.S.-Mexico Bicentennial Framework for Security, Public Health and Safe Communities includes a greater focus on drug addiction, the AP reported. The countries said they will continue cooperating to fight organized crime. “Mexico and the United States must redefine their security priorities for a new binational strategy—one that respects sovereignty and responds to the actual causes of insecurity,” former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Roberta Jacobson told the Advisor in an Aug. 17 [Q&A](#).

Dual Explosions Outside Colombia Airport Leave 3 Dead

A pair of explosions outside an airport in Cúcuta, Colombia on Tuesday left three people dead, including two police officers. The first blast occurred at around 5 a.m. just outside the Camilo Daza International Airport, as a man suspected of carrying explosives tried to climb a fence near the airport’s runway, the Associated Press reported. The as-yet unidentified man was killed instantly in the blast. Two police were sent to investigate, and about half an hour later, a second explosive device detonated at

NEWS BRIEFS

Son of Ex-Panamanian President Martinelli Pleads Guilty in U.S. Court

Former Panamanian president Ricardo Martinelli’s son, Ricardo Martinelli Linares, pleaded guilty Tuesday in New York to a charge of laundering \$28 million as a part of a scheme involving Brazil-based construction conglomerate Odebrecht, the Associated Press reported. Luis Enrique Martinelli Linares, his younger brother, also pleaded guilty to money laundering connected to the scheme earlier this month. The brothers participated in the scheme from 2009 until 2014, according to U.S. prosecutors.

Hochschild Expects Extension for Inmaculada Mine in Peru to 2042

London-listed firm Hochschild Mining expects Peruvian environmental regulators to approve in the first half of 2022 the company’s plan to extend the Inmaculada silver mine’s operations to 2042 rather than its 2023 scheduled closure, Reuters reported. Community protests in southern Peru have been targeting Hochschild’s mines in Inmaculada and Pallancata, as protesters oppose this extension saying that the mines are polluting local water sources, a claim that the firm denies.

Lisarb Energy Signs Deal to Deliver Energy From Wind Farm in Brazil

London-based Lisarb Energy announced Tuesday that it has entered Brazil’s wind market by signing a 97 megawatt renewable power purchase agreement with independent electricity and natural gas trader Tradener Ltda. Under the 12-year deal, Lisarb will deliver energy from a wind farm currently under development in Rio Grande do Norte state. The wind farm will be commissioned in 2023 and deliver energy starting in early 2024.

the scene, killing the two officers. Colombian President Iván Duque condemned the attack. "This attack is a cowardly, miserable, terrorist act, and we are in mourning," Duque said in a posting on Twitter. Investigators are attempting to identify the man at the center of the explosions by examining security cameras in the area, daily newspaper *El Tiempo* reported. Though no one has claimed responsibility, authorities blamed ELN rebels and FARC dissidents. The two explosions "indicate that the system used has characteristics that could be [those used] by the ELN and the dissidents of the FARC," said National Police head General Jorge Luis Vargas, the newspaper reported.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Chile's Central Bank Hikes Key Rate by 125 Basis Points

The Chilean central bank on Tuesday hiked its benchmark interest rate by 125 basis points to 4 percent from 2.75 percent, Reuters reported. The central bank has been increasing its Monetary Policy Rate since July. "The policy rate will continue to rise in the short term, positioning itself above the neutral level," the central bank said in a statement, citing high expectations for inflation in the coming months, Bloomberg News reported. The country's 12-month rolling inflation rate stood at 6.7 percent in November, significantly higher than the bank's tolerance range of between 2 percent and 4 percent, Reuters reported. This central bank decision comes less than a week before Sunday's runoff presidential election, and the political uncertainty is weakening the peso and increasing the cost of imports, Bloomberg News reported. "They will continue to raise rates to a level with restrictive monetary policy," said Bloomberg Latin America economist Felipe Hernández. "Considering that inflation expectations were more stable in December and also that a rapid deceleration in activity is expected in 2022, the additional rate increases will likely be smaller," he said.

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 1

implementation of public health measures, has significantly affected the delivery of non-Covid-19 essential health services. In the most recent PAHO survey, 46 percent of countries in the region continue to report significant disruption in health service delivery, affecting mother and child care, control and management of communicable disease, routine immunization and noncommunicable disease control and prevention. Although data is still limited, excess mortality and morbidity is rising. At the same time, innovation has occurred in the deployment of digital health technology at the primary care level, the organization of outreach services to the community, expansion of social protection mechanisms for health and the reorganization of service payment mechanisms. Pre-pandemic deficiencies in health systems need to be addressed, increasing public financing in health to reach 6 percent of public spending on health, allocating 30 percent to the primary health care level. Health systems' transformation based on the primary health care strategy will increase capacity, access, equity and resiliency, addressing future health needs in Latin America and improving preparedness in the face of future pandemics and public health emergencies."

A Katherine E. Bliss, senior fellow at the CSIS Global Health Policy Center: "Even before the pandemic, many countries in the region struggled to prioritize primary health care and improve community-level access to quality, affordable health services. Average annual spending on public health was below the regional standard of 6 percent; there was a shortage of health care workers; and in many countries, a patchwork of private and public insurance schemes offered a fragmented set of inconsistent services. Regional coverage of the diphtheria-tetanus-pertussis vaccine (DTP3), an indicator of children's access to the health system, had declined from 93 percent in 2012 to 80

percent in 2019. Covid-19 era disruptions have made reaching the goals of the region's 2014 Universal Health Strategy even more elusive. During the pandemic, hospitals have diverted existing beds to accommodate Covid-19 patients or added new intensive care unit beds without investing in trained care providers. Broken supply chains and delays in the delivery of imported medicines have undermined access to care for chronic, noncommunicable diseases, a leading cause of death in the region. And in 2020, DTP3

“Even before the pandemic, many countries in the region struggled to prioritize primary health care...”

— Katherine E. Bliss

coverage dropped to 77 percent, now placing a double burden on immunization providers, as they work to close the gap in routine coverage for children while delivering Covid-19 vaccines to adults. Committing to provide at least 30 percent of public health financing to primary health care, investing in training and retaining skilled health personnel and making better use of data to monitor for quality of care and equitable access to services can strengthen health systems and improve preparedness for future health emergencies."

A Antonio Vergara, head of Diagnostics Latin America at Roche: "The Covid-19 pandemic has put health at the center of the discussion again. Most of the attention and resources of the sector have been focused, understandably, on immediate needs. However, this situation has triggered interruptions in care needed by patients with other diseases that also represent public health challenges. Therefore, this current situation should be taken as an opportunity not only to address unexpected events but also to

Continued on page 4

FEATURED Q&A / Continued from page 3

protect people from long-standing diseases. In this sense, innovative diagnostics are essential as they have the potential not only to identify diseases at early stages but even in some cases to avoid them. We could also produce data that provides a better understanding of the conditions in order to predict risk factors for more people, assess the effectiveness of ongoing treatments, and/or adjust them accordingly, keeping in mind that diagnostics influence approximately 70 percent of clinical decisions. Despite this context, in Latin America, only 1 percent of the investment in the sector goes to this area. In a nutshell, diagnostics can contribute to creating more resilient health care systems with enhanced management of most public health challenges, ensuring a healthier society that is able to boost the development of Latin America and its recovery from the pandemic. To make this happen, collaborative work across sectors that articulates knowledge and resources into long-term plans oriented toward the sustainability of the health ecosystem is a must. We could leverage the power of data and innovation and comprehensive policies with a focus on better outcomes for patients."

A **Ricardo Izurieta, professor at the College of Public Health at the University of South Florida:** "The Covid-19 pandemic continues to upend the Latin American and world economy more than any other time in modern history. It forced international acceptance that economies depend on the health of our global and local communities. Hopefully, businesses have learned that health is not an expenditure but rather an investment. By investing in public health infrastructure and measures, the global economy will be reactivated, helping to curb the monetary effects of the current pandemic and others to come. Currently, SARS-CoV-2 found most

countries' health care systems unprepared to face such catastrophe. Economically driven politics created health systems with weak primary health care subsystems but expensive tertiary health care infrastructures. Due to a lack of investment in primary health care subsystems, the first line of

“By investing in public health infrastructure and measures, the global economy will be reactivated...”

— Ricardo Izurieta

defense during any pandemic, health care systems, failed. This caused an avalanche of complicated Covid-19 cases going into intensive care units of tertiary health care subsystems. Almost two years have passed since this pandemic began. But governments still fail to understand that like with a house, infectious disease control strategies cannot stand on one pillar for support (vaccines), but need at least four pillars to stand securely: 1.) vaccines; 2.) testing, tracking and isolation; 3.) repowering primary health care; and 4.) preventive measures, such as using masks and avoiding crowds. Furthermore, the brutal inequities globally, where resource-rich countries hoard vaccines, diagnostic tests and pharmacological therapeutics, prolong this pandemic. It is imperative for governmental, academic and industrial institutions to work together to decentralize the development (academia), manufacturing (industry) and procurement (government) of vaccines, rapid tests, variants sequencing, monoclonal antibodies and antivirals."

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

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