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Filling the Gaps: Learning From Each Other During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Summary: The COVID-19 crisis has created many challenges for health systems around the world. Health leaders have to focus on sustaining their organisations at all levels, and the International Hospital Federation is offering its support to them through a number of projects.

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic reminds us of how we are all interconnected. Whilst impacting different countries in different ways and to varying degrees, this pandemic has demonstrated that we all have a common ground – it is a healthcare crisis and its issues tend to be similar in one way or another.

Hospitals urgently looking for supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE), healthcare workers being exhausted up to the brim, patients overwhelming emergency rooms, doctors making difficult choices on who to treat first based on the patient's chance of survival – these are all common scenarios the global healthcare industry is facing today because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the same time, hospitals have drastically reorganised their wards to create specialist COVID-19 units and to scale up ICU beds while redistributing tasks and activities among their staff. If hospitals had to reduce activities for non-coronavirus patients, they have also had to find alternative approaches – the majority of them supported by ICT – to reach out to people mostly living in 'lockdown' situations. Many hospitals have mobilised their local communities for support, which has been given willingly, demonstrating how deeply anchored hospitals are in the community.

As an international organisation in this challenging time, the International Hospital Federation's (IHF) role is to serve as a platform for health leaders to support each other, not only during the pandemic but more importantly, beyond the pandemic. Going forward, hospital systems will have to reinvent themselves not only to recover from the initial pandemic wave that has exhausted their workforce and resources, but also learn how to live with the pandemic while fulfilling all other hospital duties. To realise

this reinvention, it will be critical for hospitals to harness the creativity and innovation, which prevailed during the peak of the coronavirus crisis. Although the prevalence of COVID-19 has placed hospitals under unprecedented pressure, this crisis has also accelerated the transformation of health services and opened the way for the long-term adoption of new practices, which will enhance the efficiency and quality of care.

Sharing best practices is crucial. With healthcare systems 'zooming in' on their respective territories, the IHF is 'zooming out.' We aim to fill the knowledge gaps amongst countries by cultivating a space for healthcare leaders to exchange best practices and information. We have set up a [dedicated resource portal](#) containing updated information and guidance for healthcare leaders managing the coronavirus crisis. Grouped into six key management areas: staffing, equipment, hospital re-organisation, good practices, recommendations and responsiveness, the information provided through the IHF portal supports healthcare leaders in making informed decisions on how to better respond to the crisis.

Learning from each other. We are inviting our members and partners to participate in our COVID-19 webinar series, to share actions they have taken in their respective countries to mitigate the coronavirus crisis. The webinars have also been an avenue for participants to raise questions and air their concerns. The recordings of the webinars and the list of upcoming webinars are available on the [IHF website](#). In parallel to our live webinar series, the IHF is launching a podcast series – 'Leading through COVID-19' – in which renowned healthcare leaders put forward pragmatic recommendations on dealing with specific topics

resulting from the coronavirus crisis, such as how to better handle communications within and outside the hospital and prioritising hospital activities with limited resources.

Finally, to further facilitate the relevant exchange of information on how to support leaders in managing their priorities and turning challenges into opportunities, the IHF has established a dedicated LinkedIn group – ‘[Together Against Covid-19](#)’ – for virtual discussion. This group welcomes health leaders from across the world to share suggestions, contributions and solutions in regard to COVID-19.

Beyond COVID-19, what is next? Healthcare systems are at the front line in this crisis, where there is much uncertainty. Whilst these systems work tirelessly on responding to the coronavirus pandemic, the IHF will support hospitals so that they could resume their activities in the best possible conditions post-pandemic by mitigating the consequences of the COVID-19 disruption. With the support of our members, the IHF has established the ‘Beyond COVID-19 Task Force,’ through which we will build a post-pandemic response based on the inputs of the Task Force members. This response will focus on three areas: human components; support systems and processes; healthcare delivery and access. The Task Force will also examine the important cross-cutting roles of finance and information systems across these three groups. The Task Force’s first outputs are anticipated to be published in early summer.

The ‘Human Factor’

As the COVID-19 pandemic places huge pressure on the ability of health systems to deliver safe, high-quality care, leaders will have to sharpen their focus on meeting the core needs of their staff, ensuring their wellbeing and sustained motivation to help them to deal with this rapidly changing situation. They will have also to draw lessons on skill mix and task shifting. In parallel, hospitals will need to regain trust amongst the communities they serve, to ensure patients have confidence in their services for non-COVID-19 health matters. Going forward, patient empowerment will need to continue, to ensure that they are engaged in decision-making processes not only concerning their health but also more broadly on healthcare services.

Support Systems and Processes

Hospitals and healthcare service organisations will need to work closely with suppliers and their partners to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global health product supply chains, affecting key materials, finished health products, shipping and logistics. Moreover, hospitals will have to examine how their physical environments and technical infrastructures need to be adapted to enable greater flexibility in responding to exceptional healthcare situations in the future.

Services and Operations

During the coronavirus pandemic, it has been necessary for many hospitals to postpone non-urgent care (particularly operations with extended recovery times) and to repurpose staff to better manage the overwhelming influx of COVID-19 cases. Flexing to meet the demands of the coronavirus crisis has been the challenge of a generation for many healthcare systems. However, going forward, hospitals will need to consider the situation of communicable diseases. Reaching out to the population will accelerate the transformation of hospitals without walls and stronger collaborations with other stakeholders including better public and private coordination.

The wide-reaching COVID-19 crisis has brought us closer together. The IHF cannot overemphasise the importance of having a global community of healthcare leaders supporting each other by exchanging knowledge and support to overcome our common enemy. At the IHF, it is our duty as an international organisation to hold everyone together, while COVID-19 is trying to knock us down one by one. ■

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Key Points

- The pandemic has demonstrated that we all, despite being in different countries, have to deal with common issues, such as a lack of PPE, staff exhaustion, or insufficient ICU capacity.
- The COVID-19 crisis has also accelerated the transformation of healthcare, and now hospitals need to harness creativity and innovation to enhance the efficiency and quality of care.
- For this, it is crucial to share best practices, learn from each other and start preparing for the post-pandemic reality.
- IHF has developed a number of initiatives to help healthcare leaders on this way. Those include a dedicated resource portal, a series of webinars, a LinkedIn group and the special ‘Beyond COVID-19 Task Force.’
- Healthcare leaders have to focus on addressing the needs of their staff, working with partners and suppliers to support systems and processes, and maintaining their services and operations in cooperation with their stakeholders.