Impact of COVID-19: Hear the perspective of TB/MDR-TB patients and frontline health care workers

A Webinar Organized by KNCV Tuberculosis Foundation in Partnership with National Tuberculosis Control Programs and Civil Society Organizations

Objectives of the presentation:
1. Understand how TB patients and health care workers were directly impacted by the measures taken for COVID-19 response
2. Discuss further measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 on TB services
3. Identify opportunities for leveraging resources and expertise from both TB & COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic had and is still having a significant impact on the entire health system with interruption of other essential health services like immunization, antenatal care attendance, and management of chronic illnesses (TB, HIV, diabetes, cancer, etc.). Unfortunately, the impact is worse among vulnerable groups. Consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on people affected by TB and TB programmes include limited access to prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care. While frontline health care workers are mobilised for the COVID-19 response other health services including TB are neglected.

This webinar provided an opportunity to hear and interact directly with patients and health care workers from the field, adding faces and feeling to the numbers. We had speakers from Kyrgyzstan, Nigeria and the Netherlands.

Speakers
- Dilshat Haitov
  Director of the Public Foundation for TB People in Kyrgyzstan
- Shonowo Ester
  Nurse in Lagos, and current TB patient
- Dr Abimbola Bowale
  Medical Director of Mainland Hospital in Yaba, Lagos
- Alies de With
  TB Nurse at GGD (Municipal & Regional Health Service) Flevoland, Netherlands

Facilitators:
- Emmy van der Grinten
  Manager Technical Division KNCV Tuberculosis Foundation
- Ineke Huitema
  Senior Consultant HRH, KNCV Tuberculosis Foundation
- Bakyt Myrzaliev
  KNCV Representative Kyrgyz Republic
- Mustapha Gidado
  Acting Executive Director KNCV Tuberculosis Foundation

How where TB patients and health care workers directly impacted by the measures taken for COVID-19?

- Due to the lock-down in the countries, movements were restricted and it was difficult to go to the clinic, get the drugs and needed support (all countries)
- Patients were missing the moral support through the health talks at the clinics as well as the nutritional support at the clinic.
- The MDR ward in Lagos (Nigeria) was changed into a COVID-19 ward. Therefore patients were moved to another hospital (120 km away) which made it difficult to provide follow-up to the patients. Psychological and social support were interrupted.
- In Flevoland (the Netherlands) the support for TB patients continued virtually and home visits were reduced to a minimum. Home visits for TB patients were done outside in the garden of patients keeping the 1.5 metre social distance as required in the Netherlands. Patients were scared to get also COVID-19. TB nurses in the Netherlands were deployed for COVID-19 contact investigation. They were also tasked to communicate to patients who tested positive for COVID-19.
- In the Netherlands the TB nurses took all TB patients over from the lung specialists so that they could concentrate on the COVID-19 patients (task shifting).
Measures to mitigate impact of COVID-19 on TB services

- Ensure that all diagnostic, treatment and care interventions continue. In Kyrgyzstan the UN distributed medicines since they were exempted from the transportation restrictions.
- Use digital health solutions for continuation of treatment and adherence. Video DOT was used in Kyrgyzstan and pictures of filled pillboxes were sent to the treatment providers in the Netherlands.
- Community support is very important. Nigeria learned from Ebola experience in 2014 and had already Community Health Care Workers that could give support to patients.
- Ensure that psychological and social support to TB patients continues and that drugs are available.
- During communication information on COVID-19 and safety measures need to be included.

Opportunities for leveraging resources and expertise from both TB & COVID-19

- Infection Prevention and Control in health care settings and the community
- Contact investigation
- Combined/integrated sample transportation
- GeneXpert to use for both TB and COVID-19
- Community based treatment
- Psychological and social support

Provision of additional funding from Global Fund for mitigation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the provision of TB services.

Take home messages (including messages from the expert panellists):

- Practical solutions are necessary to ensure that COVID-19 and future outbreaks do not disrupt other health services such as TB prevention, diagnosis and care (all)
- All organizations should unite efforts and resources and make sure to provide proper information for general populations (based on WHO recommendations and follow protocols) in order to prevent spreading anxiety (Kyrgyzstan)
- It is important to continue with psychological and social support and patients need to be seen at a regular basis (Kyrgyzstan and Nigeria)
- TB still exists so we should not forget the patients during this COVID-19 and other pandemics (Nigeria)
- Proper information for all, stigma and fear to be addressed, keep up emotional support (the Netherlands)