



ESMO Open Letter

Urgent Call for Action: Strengthen Health Systems for Continued Cancer Care During and beyond Pandemics

Lugano 2 July 2024

Dear Esteemed Representatives of Member States of the World Health Organization,

We are writing to you on behalf of the [European Society for Medical Oncology](#) a professional organisation for medical oncology, representing more than 35,000 members from 172 countries — with an urgent request to strengthen health systems' resilience in the face of pandemics and global health crises so that millions of patients with cancer are not left behind.

You will be aware that the COVID-19 pandemic strained healthcare systems and had a profound impact on cancer care, placing patients battling this disease across the globe in vulnerable situations with an increased risk of severity of the disease, when immunosuppressed through tumor malignancy and anti-tumor treatmentsⁱ. Importantly, data consistently show that a four-week treatment delay is associated with increased mortality and further mortality with longer delaysⁱⁱ; and delays in cancer screening, diagnosisⁱⁱⁱ and treatment^{iv} due to the pandemic already have^v and continue to lead to substantial loss of lives (e.g. in the coming years, in France, possible excess mortality due to cancer of up to 6000 patients; and in England up to 3400 patients).

Recognizing the gravity of this situation, we encourage Member States to finalise the Pandemic Agreement in the first instance and latest by May 2025, including adding a direct reference to secondary and tertiary care - where patients with cancer are predominately treated - and retaining text on protecting persons in vulnerable situations, maintaining essential health care services, and protecting the safety, mental health and wellbeing of healthcare workers.

Sustainable cancer care services must be integrated into preparedness planning and responses to both pandemics and health emergencies, and concerted efforts are needed to translate principles into tangible actions that safeguard the rights and well-being of patients with cancer worldwide. Therefore, we call upon Member States to immediately move on with addressing the multifaceted challenges posed by pandemics to continuity of essential health services like cancer care, by prioritizing the following key actions:

Safeguarding access to cancer care - Member States must ensure that essential cancer services – screening, early detection, diagnosis, treatment, follow-up and palliative care - remain accessible to patients and uninterrupted during pandemics. This requires adequate allocation of resources, including for medicines and personnel, and the continuance of active clinical trials.



Ensuring adequate support for healthcare workers - Healthcare workers, including oncology professionals, faced unprecedented challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, including increased workloads and [psychological distress](#), that continue today. Member States must prioritize the well-being of healthcare workers by ensuring decent working conditions, and providing mental health support services and ethical guidelines for decision-making in situations when resources are scarce, to enhance their capacity to deliver quality cancer care in challenging circumstances.

Mitigating inequalities - Member States must strive to establish sustainable and resilient healthcare systems, founded on Universal Health Coverage (UHC), and address disparities in access to cancer care within and between countries. This includes [optimizing the oncology workforce](#), and developing robust referrals across the continuum of care during a pandemic, a health emergency and always, to ensure timely and affordable access for patients from primary to secondary and tertiary care.

The finalisation and implementation of the Pandemic Agreement presents a critical opportunity for Member States to reaffirm their commitment to protecting the health and dignity of all individuals affected by cancer and [advancing UHC](#). By taking decisive action to prioritize cancer care within their national pandemic preparedness and response strategies, Member States can help mitigate the adverse consequences of pandemics on patients with cancer and contribute to the collective effort to build a healthier and more resilient world for future generations.

ESMO stands ready to support Member States in their efforts to ensure that no one is left behind in the fight against the global scourge of cancer.

Sincerely,

Dr Andrés Cervantes, ESMO President

Dr Jean-Yves Blay, ESMO Director of Public Policy

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