

The contribution of the European Union in terms of medical assistance for combating COVID-19 (Note II)

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Abstract

In the context of the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission adopted a series of measures meant to ensure a good cooperation between member states, which target both cross-border medical assistance and the financing and procurement of monetary resources necessary for the efficiency and cover of medical services required for the treatment of patients affected by this virus. In order to support this endeavor, conventions were adopted for the medical assistance of cross-border patients and for the acknowledgement of the medical professionals' qualifications, as well as for the formation of emergency medical teams with the aim of coordinating and financing cross-border medical assistance and emergency transport of patients infected with COVID-19.

Keywords: cross-border medical assistance, acknowledgement of medical qualifications, financing and emergency transport for patients with Covid-19.

Introduction

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic represents a global challenge which requires urgent solutions with immediate impact on an international level. The European Union supports the efforts of member states in combating the virus, offering financial support in the amount of almost 36 billion EURO in order to respond to the immediate health crisis and the humanitarian needs generated by it.

In accordance with the European Union treaties, the member states are responsible for adopting measures to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic at a national level, especially regarding the national health systems, the repatriation of citizens and the restrictions imposed on the citizens' public and private lives (1); (3); (5).

The European Union (EU) adopted a series of measures for combatting this virus. For this purpose, measures were adopted for the coordination of cross-border medical assistance, the coordination and financing of emergency transport for patients infected with COVID-19, the reimbursement of patients' medical expenses in the member state in which they receive treatment, the free movement of patients outside internal borders, the free movement of

medical professionals, the formation of emergency medical teams, the adoption of medical assistance conventions for cross-border patients, as well as the acknowledgement of the medical professionals' qualifications.

Also, the European Union approved new rules which allow member states to request financial aid from the EU Solidarity Fund in order to cover health emergencies. By the recent extension of the fund's area of application, an amount of up to 800 million EURO will be at the disposal of member states this year for combating the pandemic caused by the coronavirus (12); (14).

All this led to the activity's efficiency to limit the spread of COVID-19 and the successful treatment of those infected.

Emergency assistance granted by the EU within cross-border cooperation in terms of medical assistance granted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic

As shown in the Official Journal of the European Union series CI 111/1 of April 3, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic already exerted great pressure on the health systems in several EU member states, many of which signaled that

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their places in the intensive care units could be insufficient. Several countries already requested emergency assistance from the EU and other EU member states, and the request was answered by some member states. A series of recent regional initiatives were registered in this regard in the area of hospital cooperation targeting the treatment of patients affected by COVID-19, which contributed to the relief of the capacities of the health systems which were in difficulty, offering places in intensive care sections. Thus Germany, Poland and Romania sent teams of doctors to help treat patients in the hospitals of north and south Italy; Austria, Belgium, Germany and Luxembourg put their intensive care units at the disposal of Dutch, French, and Italian patients in critical state; Luxembourg and Germany sent aerial ambulances, pilots and specialized personnel to help Italy, France and the Netherlands in the fight against the virus (14); (15).

In this international context generated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the European Commission appeals to the national, regional and local authorities in the health field to use the existing structures and mechanisms to collaborate in offering assistance to patients who are in need of intensive care, offering the possibility of hospitalization. The Commission directs to the creation of possibilities for medical professionals to exchange expertise and knowledge, working together with other members of medical personnel at a cross-border level, so that overloaded sanitary units of member states in need of help can be relieved and the functioning of their own health systems is not endangered (14); (15).

The European Commission is committed to supporting sanitary authorities through the concordance of requests with offers of places in intensive care sections for patients and of qualified medical personnel, with the help of the Health Security Committee and of the Early alert and quick response system (EARS). The coordination and co-financing of emergency medical transport for patients and qualified medical personnel teams are also ensured at a cross-border level, when member states request assistance through the EU Civil protection mechanism.

For a good international cooperation, ensuring clarity regarding patient mobilization methods, at a cross-border level, is wanted through: transfer of patient medical files, ensuring the continuity of medical assistance and mutual acknowledgement of medical networks in accordance with the Directive regarding cross-border medical assistance; encouraging health authorities at local, regional, and national level to use, if they exist, bilateral and regional agreements and contact points for relieving intensive care units in neighboring areas where patients with COVID-19 are treated, and encouraging member states or non-governmental specialized organizations to send qualified medical personnel teams to other member states (9); (10); (14).

Coordination of cross-border medical assistance

- The EU Health Security Committee, consisting of representatives from member states and presided by the Commission, will coordinate the cross-border medical assistance. The Committee supports the exchange of information and the coordination of training and reactions

to severe cross-border health threats.

- The Commission will facilitate, with the help of the EU Health Security Committee and of the Early alert and quick response system, the coordination of the requests for cross-border medical assistance. The requests for assistance could refer to places in the intensive care units, to the treatment and transfer of patients, as well as to qualified medical personnel teams.

- The competent authority of the member state in need of assistance shall address the member states and the European Commission through EARS for this matter. The criteria to determine the appropriate moment to request help from the EU is at the competence of the national authorities.

- Member states who can offer assistance can respond to the request through EARS. Once an offer has been accepted, the cooperating member states coordinate the direct support among themselves and the hospitals regarding the details of the assistance.

- The Commission will update a summary table containing the requests and the available assistance, and the Health Security Committee will be continuously informed (9); (10); (15).

Reimbursement of patient's medical costs in the member state in which they receive treatment

- Covering medical assistance costs shall be regulated based on the Regulations regarding the coordination of social security systems.

- Patients who must be transported to a hospital in a neighboring state or member state which is offering medical assistance must, usually, carry a prior authorization from the competent social security institution. The Commission appeals for member states to adopt a pragmatic approach for patients who require emergency medical aid and, considering the emergency in the public health field, take into account a general prior authorization in order to ensure coverage of all costs borne by the medical assistance supplier.

- It is recommended that the competent member state consider it sufficient if a patient presents a document which proves that they have health insurance upon entering the hospital or that they are subject to another practical convention which can be established between the member states involved. These guidelines are applied to emergency medical assistance only in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic (4); (13); (15).

Medical assistance conventions for cross-border patients

- Patients must receive a copy of their medical files in order to facilitate treatment in another member state, as well as subsequent treatment received at home.

- It is possible that health authorities will be obliged to adopt additional measures in order to ensure the continuity of medical assistance, considering the possible differences of treatment protocols in different states.

- The general principle of mutual acknowledgement of medical networks is applied in accordance with the Directive regarding cross-border medical assistance.

- National contact points regarding cross-border medical assistance can offer general information for cross-border patients (10); (14); (15).

Free movement of patients outside internal borders

- The rules set out in the Directive regarding free movement are still applicable for EU citizens. Patients who need emergency medical assistance in a medical unit in another member state cannot be refused entrance if temporary controls are set up at internal border crossings. Patients who travel in order to receive non-emergency treatment in another member state must check if border crossing controls will allow them passage (7); (8).

Medical personnel cooperation at cross-border level

- The European Commission advises member states to facilitate the smooth passage of medical professionals across borders and to allow their unrestricted work in a medical unit in another member state.

- Member states or specialized NGOs can send qualified medical personnel teams to other member states in response to requests for assistance.

- Eight European emergency medical teams are already certified or in the process of being certified by WHO in order to offer assistance, with the aim of managing emergency situations on an international level and can be deployed through the Union's Civil protection mechanism, based on a request. The current capacity is limited at present, as it is possible that the personnel is already fully busy in their country of origin, for the most cases. Nevertheless, European medical teams could be extended by activating additional financial support from the EU (10); (14); (15).

Acknowledgement of the medical professionals' qualifications

- Many professions in the medical field, such as doctors with basic medical training, a series of medical specializations, such as respiratory medicine, immunology or communicable diseases, and general nurses are based on minimal harmonization pursuant to the Directive regarding the acknowledgement of professional qualifications.

In case of temporary or occasional supply of services, the European Commission considers that a simple statement is sufficient for these professionals, without the need to wait for a decision from the authorities in the host member state. A mutual acknowledgement procedure can take place for other medical professions, in case competent authorities consider it necessary to compare the basis of the professional training.

- The Directive regarding the acknowledgement of professional qualifications sets out the maximum requirements which medical professionals need to fulfill if they wish to be transferred within the EU. The Directive does not oblige member states to establish restrictions concerning acknowledgement procedures and, therefore, does not hinder member states from adopting a more liberal approach regarding medical professionals who wish to work in a certain member state, regardless if it involves

provision of services or establishing residence in the respective member state.

In order to facilitate international medical cooperation also based on the situation targeted, the requirement of a prior statement and prior qualification check can be removed, or shorter time frames for the processing of requests can be applied, as well as requesting less documents than normally, not requiring authorized translations or not insisting on a compensatory measure in case the host member state considers that there is no major risk for the safety of patients (11); (14); (15).

Financial assistance for cross-border cooperation in the medical assistance field

- The EU offers financial assistance through the Solidarity fund to member states affected by a public health emergency.

- Health expenses are also eligible within the Structural funds for countries and regions, and a greater flexibility is ensured regarding the allocation of funds as part of the coordinated economic response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- It is possible that soon additional financial means will be provided from the EU budget through the Emergency Support Instrument (ESI), subject to the approval of the budgetary authorities. It is predicted that the funds directed through ESI will cover the cross-border cooperation in order to diminish the pressure placed on health systems in the most affected areas of the European Union (12); (13); (15).

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