Key Learning Themes

This learning brief summarizes the experience and knowledge emanating from a number of countries that have strived to maintain and improve the quality of their health services, despite the challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The common learning themes identified across the countries are as follows:

- Leadership, engagement and training of health sector stakeholders proved to be essential to ensuring buy-in of adaptive measures for the provision of quality health care services.
- Facility-level indicators of performance in delivering essential services and the incorporation of these into dashboards enabled monitoring of the use of essential health services across the health system.
- Adaptation of existing health care protocols, pathways and infrastructure was shown to be effective at ensuring the provision of timely, safe and effective emergency stroke care, as part of a resilient health system.
- Digitalization of stroke care and maternal care is a safe and effective way of maintaining the quality of essential health services while mitigating against the risks of COVID-19 infection;
- Digital applications played a key role in supporting health care providers with timely and up-to-date information, as well as providing data to policy-makers to support sustained delivery of quality care.
- Quality of care is an essential component of global health security, which can help ensure that future responses to global pandemics are robust.

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the continuity and quality of health care services worldwide beginning in March 2020. The priority to focus on infection prevention and control of COVID-19 necessitated a reorganization of health care resources in order to provide safe, effective and timely care in low- and middle-income countries. This learning brief provides the essence of initiatives on quality of care in the COVID-19 context across several low- and middle-income countries including Kenya, Ethiopia and India.

Summary

- Maintaining quality essential health services during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ethiopia: the role of emergency operating centres.

In Ethiopia, in order to mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 emergency response on the provision of quality essential health services, emergency operating centres (EOC), that were initially designed to prioritize public health emergencies, were restructured to include essential health services as a pillar of the response to COVID/19 emergency. This pillar involved overseeing the maintenance of essential health services, including reproductive, maternal, newborn and child health, HIV/AIDS care, as well as essential surgical care.
Emergent learnings from countries

Quality of stroke care during the COVID-19 pandemic in low- and middle-income countries.
Across several low- and middle-income countries, national protocols and procedures were adapted to protect and maintain a continuum in quality stroke care (patient beds/care/units) as well as providing timely emergency treatment. Adaptive measures included rapid triaging of stroke patients according to COVID-19 risk status, dedicated pathways for the transfer of COVID-19 positive stroke patients, digitalization of stroke care including “telesstroke”, tele-rehabilitation, and video-conferencing, and protected stroke code activation to maintain infection prevention and control precautions.

Ensuring a continuum of quality maternal care for pregnant mothers in Kenya during the COVID-19 outbreak.
In Kenya, digital health care helped mitigate the disruption of mother and child care delivery caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, by maintaining access to and use of quality maternal care services. The digital pregnancy model (so-called MomCare) provided dedicated support to pregnant women and access to quality health services in all Kenyan health care facilities. Its digital infrastructure included birth planning, extended bed allowance, emergency ambulance during curfew, SMS education campaigns, and COVID-19 preparedness support for care providers.

Use of a digital app, available worldwide, for an integrated approach to improving the quality of health service delivery during COVID-19
In Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and the United Republic of Tanzania, a SafeCare mobile application helped connect health workers and create a shared and real-time understanding of pandemic preparedness. The app self-assessed health care facilities on their quality of care processes in place against COVID-19 and communicated essential, practical and reliable, information based on WHO standards and guidelines. This supported health care providers to carry out a gap analysis of their quality of care processes, access actionable information on COVID-19 and enable data-driven targeted quality interventions to sustain quality care delivery.

How quality of care can help enhance global health security in the COVID-19 era
Quality of care is an essential component of health security. Without quality of care, infectious disease surveillance, outbreak control and knowledge transfer all rapidly suffer when put under pressure. Quality of care interventions contribute to improved detection and control of communicable disease, and hence maintain and improve health security by protecting the patient population and health care workers from infection.

Quality of stroke care
- Rapid screening evaluation protocol helped to reduce the delay in stroke evaluation and provide timely stroke care to patients.
- Adoption of telemedicine and telerehabilitation successfully preserved the continuity of quality stroke care, while limiting physical contact for health care professionals.
- This enabled the volume of patients presenting with stroke symptoms being adequately assessed and treated to the expected standard of care, and soon returning to that of the pre-pandemic period. The restoration of stroke admissions and intervention rates thereby ensured the delivery of quality stroke care in India.

Essential health services
- Designation of non-COVID-19 health facilities and communication of this designation to the community enabled timely access to essential health services.
- Classification of facilities into COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 centres, limited nosocomial transmission of COVID-19 infection, and contributed to greater protection from infection of those health care workers providing essential health services.
• Enhanced health sector leadership engagement enabled the necessary attention to be given to essential service provision. This helped minimize duplication of efforts and improved coordination of both COVID-19 response and quality essential health service provision in Ethiopia.

Quality maternal care

• Comparison across the two 6-month periods (pre- and post-March 2020) showed that care-seeking behaviour (enrolment, antenatal/postnatal care and skilled deliveries) increased for mothers-to-be enrolled in MomCare during COVID-19 restrictions in Kenya.

• The MomCare digital initiative provided a continuum of safe, accessible, patient-centred and timely maternal care to expectant mothers, in response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Digital app for quality service delivery

• Digital tools allowed facilities to implement changes advised for quality and to repeat self-assessments to track progress, while data dashboards derived from the app informed the allocation of supplies, transfer of patients and quality training to enable an integrated and timely pandemic response.

• Health care facilities in remote areas of Africa, struggling with critical gaps in the quality of care delivery, are now able to benefit from digital tools that collect and provide real-time information on staffing levels, essential supplies and evidence-based guidelines, to empower and connect stakeholders for better response to emerging scenarios, such as COVID-19.

Quality of care for global health security

• Interventions aimed at adherence to and quality of infection prevention and control guidelines (i.e. safe, timely, effective, person-centred care for COVID-19 patients) contribute to improved detection and control of communicable disease, and hence maintain and improve health security.

• The advancement of research and interactions between quality of care and global health security creates incentives for governments to invest in quality of care as a key component of national health security policy.

Further reading

https://www.who.int/health-topics/quality-of-care
https://www.who.int/teams/integrated-health-services/quality-health-services
https://www.who.int/initiatives/who-global-learning-laboratory-for-quality-uhc