



Commentary

Unravelling general practitioners' barriers to deal with long COVID: Experiences from Malta

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Primary health care plays an important role in the prevention and management of health conditions, and it is the first point of care for the community with the goal to provide “health for all” [1]. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the landscape of the primary health care, forcing new practices such as adopting to remote consultations as well as enduring new challenges including caring for patients with persistent COVID-19 symptoms (Long Covid) [2,3]. The term “Long Covid” has been assimilated as the occurrence of persistent debilitating symptoms following a COVID-19 infection, causing a range of cognitive and physiological disabilities irrespective of the severity of the initial infection and the patient’s age as well as previous health status [4].

The integration of healthcare systems play an important role when caring for Long Covid patients to meet the patients’ need. Indeed, caring for Long Covid patients is recommended to take place at the primary health care due to the need for continuity of care arising from the ongoing nature of this condition [5]. However, general practitioners (GPs) need to be equipped with appropriate understanding of the patients’ perspective and experience along with knowledge on the disease to be able to support Long Covid patients [6]. This led us to explore and determine GP’s general knowledge and experience on Long Covid care within primary health care of Malta.

Malta, a small European country comprising of two inhabited islands across an archipelago of 316km² at cross-roads between the European and North Africa continents. Like the rest of Europe, Malta reported its first COVID-19 cases in early 2020 and followed similar mitigations—relaxation strategies to neighbouring countries [7,8]. The healthcare system in Malta offers free primary healthcare through ten health centres distributed across the islands as well as free tertiary care. Additionally, several pay-out of pocket private GP clinics and hospitals are found throughout the islands [9].

An observational study using a validated survey [10] was set to explore and determine the general knowledge and experiences of GPs on

Long Covid care within Malta’s primary health care during Summer 2022. It is evident from this study that many GPs (77.78 % CI95 %: 62.52–88.29) provide care to Long Covid patients in Malta. This follows the fact that GP practices are more easily accessible at a community level and most follow a continue of care setting, placing them in the ideal position to practice personalized medicine [11]. Despite this, more than half of GP responders (64.44 % CI95 %: 59.79–76.82) reported that they did not have sufficient scientific knowledge on Long Covid diagnosis ($p = 0.76$) and treatment ($p = 0.74$), irrelevant if they worked within the state or private sector. A consensus was identified among GPs when it came to long-term caring for Long Covid patients, with lack of appropriate follow-up being the result of “*there has been no training or information as to how to follow such patients*”. Additionally, “*for patients to be followed up well, we need to know what we are looking for, how to assess and how to manage*”. This highlights the urgent need for GPs to be provided with adequate evidence while undergoing comprehensive training to facilitate the care of Long Covid. Even more so in cases where Long Covid patients have additional underlying long-term co-morbidities apart from Long Covid [12], as this further challenges the primary health care limited resources [11]. Additionally, it was evident that different Long Covid diagnostic criteria and follow-up plans were being followed, coinciding with other reports [13–17]. The current practice in Malta is impacting on care provision to Long Covid patients with possibility of sub-standardized care with different outcomes. Although generic literature-based guidelines for Long Covid have been proposed [18], country specific guidelines are recommended. Considering the differences in primary health care systems and set-ups, it is recommended that a local Maltese standardized Long Covid guideline and management plan is formulated [17,19].

Therefore, considering that an estimated 45 % of COVID-19 survivors are experiencing Long COVID-19 [20], it is timely that standardized primary healthcare Long Covid guidelines and management plans are

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formulated, which echo several GPs advice [15-17,19]. These should follow a holistic approach in conjunction with multidisciplinary rehabilitation services [18] that considers an integrated care of both Long COVID and any other underlying co-morbidities.

Ethic approval

The Belgian SGP network was approved by the Ethical Committees of the Scientific Society of Flemish GPs and the Catholic University of Louvain (UCL). The English questionnaire version was approved by the University of Malta Research and Ethics Committee (ID: MED-2022-0011).

Consent to participate

Participants gave their informed consent on opting to participating in the survey.

Consent for publication

N/A.

Availability of data and material

Data is available upon request.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sarah Cuschieri: Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Sarah Moreels:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of Competing Interest

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