

Editorial

Testing times

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European life will never be the same again.¹ The coronavirus pandemic has, and will, dramatically change how medicine is practised now and in the future. It also brings home, in case we did not realise it, how we are all interconnected and interdependent. What can we do to help in these uncertain times?

The SARS-CoV-2 virus is highly contagious - it does not respect borders, countries, societies, communities or families. Even with most of the world in lockdown, clinicians are battling with support measures for those with severe COVID-19. Healthcare resources are being diverted pragmatically to source masks, virology services, personal protective equipment and ventilators as well as building field hospitals and, sadly, morgues. Emergency care is taking over the time, resources and premises normally used for routine care. The loss of sexual and reproductive health services, deemed by some governments as non-essential, poses significant challenges for all of us.

It is likely that the amount of time dedicated to sexual intercourse (at least with regular partners) during social distancing, isolation and working from home has increased. Lockdowns and travel restrictions are hampering access to contraceptive supplies and services across the world.² These factors could lead to millions of additional unintended pregnancies, millions of unsafe abortions and thousands of resultant deaths.

History has taught us that sexual and reproductive health and rights are often casualties of conflicts and emergencies³ - this virus is no different as it wreaks havoc globally. The incidence of domestic violence,⁴ rape (and likely STIs too) increases while access to services become almost non-existent. Rape and domestic violence increase the need for emergency contraception, abortion and contraception in the first instance. As always, marginalised individuals and communities suffer proportionately more.

The reported demand for condoms has risen sharply⁵ as accessibility to contraception and abortion is significantly reduced. Yet condom manufacture is not considered an essential service and some condom factories, importantly in Asia, are in lockdown.

We need to be innovative in our service provision; in this we need national authorities to react swiftly to facilitate this. Health Ministries need to be ready to make emergency modifications to relevant regulations, for example those that insist upon multiple doctors' signatures, face-to-face consultations and waiting periods. Drug regulators need to urgently vary licences to make a range of prescription-only contraceptive products available under the supervision of a pharmacist.

New, simplified guidelines and protocols are being written speedily.^{6,7} Telemedicine with video consultations and remote prescribing are now the new reality. This cannot be done without the support of pharmacies - who are themselves subject to increased workload and constrained by breakdowns in supply chains, particularly from China and India.⁸ Infection testing can be done in some places using postal services e.g. <https://sh24.org.uk/sexual-health/stis> .

The European Society of Contraception and Reproductive Health, in an endeavour to support our colleagues and provide the best service possible in the circumstances, proposes the following measures:

1. Adoption or extension of new models of care such as task-sharing.⁹
2. Remote consultations and prescribing for complex contraception needs and, particularly, for medical abortion at home (telemedicine).¹⁰
3. The extended use of long-acting reversible contraception (etonogestrel implants and 52-mg levonorgestrel-releasing intrauterine contraceptives) up to one year beyond their lifespan.¹¹
4. The use of oral progestogen-only contraception as a supplement to, or a substitute for, existing contraceptive methods, where appropriate.
5. Continued use of combined oral contraception over time for low-risk users, without the need for routine checks.

These are simple measures that, with the support of pharmacies, will support a continued service and, although not ideal, will hopefully ameliorate the situation and relieve the plight of many people in these unprecedented times.

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