COVID-19 Halts Reproductive Care for Millions of Women

Since coronavirus disease 2019 ushered in lockdowns and limited movement, London-based Marie Stopes International reported that roughly 2 million fewer women have received reproductive care services through its programs in 37 countries. The result could be 1.5 million additional unsafe abortions, 900,000 unintended pregnancies, and 3100 additional deaths, according to the nonprofit organization that provides contraception and safe abortion.

In a recent update, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) also warned that responses to the pandemic—clinic closures, supply chain delays, or travel restrictions—have curtailed women’s sexual and reproductive health services. In response, MSF has worked with governments around the world to ensure that reproductive services are deemed essential and remain open. However, Manisha Kumar, MD, MPH, coordinator of the MSF Task Force for Safe Abortion Care, said during an August press briefing that many organizations have had to provide care in ways that don’t require women to travel to brick-and-mortar facilities.

Expanding access to self-care or community-based models of care, is an approach that MSF supports. For example, in the United Kingdom Marie Stopes has worked with partners since April to provide telehealth care to 7000 women taking medical abortion drugs at home. In Zimbabwe, the organization has integrated family planning and contraception services into local immunization programs; in other countries they’ve delivered contraceptives, Banchiamlack Dessalegn, PhD, MA, regional director for East and Southern Africa at Marie Stopes, said during the MSF briefing.

Kumar said she hopes such innovative approaches will lead to lasting change and expanded access to reproductive care. “We have a really unique opportunity to completely revolutionize our approach to sexual and reproductive health services,” she added.

New Insights on COVID-19’s Hyperinflammation in Children

A rare, life-threatening hyperinflammatory syndrome that some children develop after coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is distinct from Kawasaki disease, according to a collaboration among European scientists.

Although most children with severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) infection have mild or no symptoms, some develop a Kawasaki-like condition called multisystem inflammatory syndrome in children (MIS-C) about 4 to 6 weeks after their infection. To understand why, the investigators studied the immune responses of 41 children with mild COVID-19, 13 others who had MIS-C, and 28 children who were treated for Kawasaki disease before the pandemic.

They found that the MIS-C inflammatory response is distinct from the cytokine storm seen in adults with severe COVID-19 and from hyperinflammation in children with Kawasaki disease. Patients with MIS-C had less interleukin-17A-mediated inflammation and distinct autoantibodies compared with children who had Kawasaki disease. The results lay the groundwork for future studies on the mechanism of MIS-C.

“There is an urgent need to better understand why a small minority of children infected with SARS-CoV-2 develop MIS-C, and we are adding a piece to the puzzle,” corresponding author Petter Brodin, MD, PhD, pediatrician and researcher at the Karolinska Institutet, said in a statement. “Better knowledge of the pathogenesis is important for development of optimal treatments that can dampen the cytokine storm and hopefully save lives.”

Pandemic Accelerates the Threat of Global Hunger

Acute hunger is expected to affect 270 million people worldwide by this year’s end—an 82% increase since the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic began, according to the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

Severe food insecurity rose 70% in the 4 years leading up to the pandemic, according to the WFP. But now the economic fall-out from pandemic-related job loss in cities in low- and middle-income countries and less money being sent home by relatives working in wealthier countries have compounded an already bleak situation.

In Latin America, which WFP said is the hardest hit region, the pandemic’s effects have led to a 3-fold increase in the number of people seeking food assistance. Food insecurity is up by 135% in West and Central Africa and by 90% in southern Africa.

In response, the WFP is working to boost the number of people it reaches with food assistance to 138 million this year from 97 million in 2019. To support the effort, the organization is seeking $4.9 billion from donors over the next 6 months. To help local economies, more than half of the relief from WFP will be delivered in cash and vouchers.

“The frontline in the battle against the coronavirus is shifting from the rich world to the poor world,” WFP Executive Director David Beasley, JD, said in a statement. “Until the day we have a medical vaccine, food is the best vaccine against chaos. Without it, we could see increased social unrest and protests, a rise in migration, deepening conflict and widespread under-nutrition among populations that were previously immune from hunger.” — Bridget M. Kuehn, MSJ

Note: Source references are available through embedded hyperlinks in the article text online.