

Health system resilience and health workforce capacities: health system responses during COVID-19

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Background:

The present crisis offers a unique opportunity to better understanding the specific contribution of the health workforce to health system resilience, and more specifically to the adaptive, absorptive and transformative capacities that influence how health systems respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methods:

The study examined different capacities in the context of the health system as the central prerequisite of health system resilience. We compared health policies and services responses in Austria, Denmark, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK. The selection is based on differences in types of health care systems and pandemic burdens in the first wave. Country experts compiled descriptive case studies using written secondary and primary sources.

Results:

During the first wave of the pandemic, the contribution of the health workforce rested on a broad range of capacities. The absorptive capacity concerned the freeing up capacities for

newly established Covid-19 wards in hospitals. The adaptive capacity focused on increasing health workers. The transformative capacity concerned new service offerings. The influence of health systems was most visible in relation to the substantive areas of health care delivery at play, and less so in relation to the specific range of capacities of the health workforce. The lack of distinct patterns was striking, considering the inclusion of health systems, which differ on many counts.

Conclusions:

The study calls for a reconceptualization of the institutional prerequisites of health system resilience to grasp more fully the manifold and unique health workforce contribution. Governance is the key to effective health system responses to the COVID-19 crisis, and health professions are part and parcel of governance as frontline workers and collective actors. This requires improving health workforce capacities and strengthening the integration of health professions in health governance.