



EXPERIENCES FROM THE FIELD

REORGANIZING HEALTH SERVICES IN SIERRA LEONE

Our experience organizing health services and preparing communities during Ebola has played a vital role in our handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even so, the current crisis has led to a drop in the number of assisted deliveries and a rise in maternal mortality in the facilities we manage here. CUAMM's work continues, based as always on our longstanding principles.

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Since the start of the pandemic, Sierra Leone has recorded a total of 2,406 cases of Covid-19 – a relatively limited number compared to other countries, and also a noteworthy one, given that the local culture complicates social distancing and 47% of the population has only on-and-off access to running water. The factors underlying this apparent “resistance” to SARS-CoV-2 are being looked into, but credit is due at least in part to the government's timely actions: **the National Covid-19 Emergency Response Center (NACOVERC) launched a plan for a prompt response** to the health crisis in February 2020, adopting many of the measures used during the Ebola outbreak that brought the country to its knees in 2014, but left it with critical know-how on epidemic preparedness.

Community Care Centers (CCCs) were readied, Covid-19 Treatment Centers (CTCs) with a total of 820 hospital beds were set up, and an awareness-raising plan was implemented to provide the community with information on preventive measures such as social distancing, handwashing and the correct use of masks. The country also adopted restrictive measures including lockdown and the closures of borders and airports. CUAMM took part in NACOVERC's technical meetings, helping draft guidelines on the management of Covid-19 in pregnant women and protocols for Community Health Workers (CHWs, who are among the most at-risk parties), while at the operational level we sought to identify new needs:

- o the **National Emergency Medical Service (NEMS) ambulance service** made transport available not only to obstetric patients, as before, but now also to Covid-19 patients, who would otherwise be unable to get to the hospital for a safe delivery due to the lockdown;
- o **support for hospital clinical activities** was ensured thanks to the ongoing presence of specialists from abroad;
- o **stocking and distribution of drugs**, equipment and protective items (e.g. masks) was carried out;
- o **540 health workers were given training**, with theoretical and practical courses on Covid-19;

- o **tents were set up at hospital entrances** for patient screening, and other areas were reworked to create isolation spaces for patients suspected of infection;
- o **CHWs provided communities with accurate and clear information** on the pandemic and taught them how to prevent infection.

Despite this response, as the virus advanced, anxiety continued to grow among the population – understandably, given how Ebola seared the collective memory. This led to a **drop in the use of health services**, with deliveries at the Princess Christian Maternity Hospital (PCMH) plunging by 46.8% in April 2020 compared to the previous year (779 in April 2019 vs. 414 in April 2020).

In the three Regional Hospitals in Sierra Leone where CUAMM maintains a presence (PCMH, BO Hospital and Makeni Hospital) **16 maternal deaths due to indirect causes were recorded between April and June 2020, compared to 4 in the same period in 2019**. At PCMH alone there were eleven such deaths in 2020, while 2019 saw only a single maternal death in the first three months of the pandemic.

Restrictive measures such as social distancing also led to a falling-off in blood donations, which has jeopardized the timely response to obstetric emergencies.

In addition, nearly 11% of the country's health workers have been infected with Covid-19. Quarantine by doctors, nurses and cleaners has made it necessary to close some wards (including Freetown's pediatric hospital, with infants in critical conditions being transferred to unsuitable facilities) and operating rooms, thereby increasing the workloads of other hospitals.

The crisis has not yet come to an end, but CUAMM's work continues, based as always on our longstanding principles: ensuring care and trust in our relationships as we stand side by side with local populations.