

# Impact of COVID-19 Measures on a Paediatric Oncology Outreach Program: Medical Perspectives

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## Abstract

Background Paediatric oncology outreach programs have been effective development interventions to reduce inequalities in healthcare between high-income countries (HIC) versus low and middle-income countries (LMIC). But little is known about its sustainability during times of a pandemic. This study assesses the impact of COVID-19 government measures on a paediatric oncology outreach program between three large referral hospitals in the Netherlands, Indonesia and Kenya. Methods The head from each paediatric oncology outreach partner site was interviewed using a semi-structured questionnaire in June 2021. Results COVID-19 government measures impacted childhood cancer care at all three hospitals. However, disruptions in services are more prominent at partner sites in LMIC, increasing existing inequalities. The doctor from Dutch hospital, located in a HIC, reported only one disruption which is a decrease in surveillance evaluations for patients who completed cancer treatment. The doctors from Indonesian and Kenyan hospitals, located in LMIC, reported multiple disruptions. For example, reduced number of cancer diagnoses, delayed presentations, medical staff shortages, limited availability of chemotherapy and blood products, and delayed or modified treatment administration. Physical interaction between medical teams of all three participating institutions has slowed down. Hereby, adequate transfer of knowledge, skills and expertise have been adversely affected. Conclusion COVID-19 government measures have negatively impacted the intrinsic nature of the paediatric oncology outreach program. Disruptions in childhood cancer care services are more prominent at partner sites in LMIC. Government leaders and policy makers should take collateral damage of their policies and local settings into account to protect children with cancer

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