Questionnaire by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right of all persons to the enjoyment of the highest standards of physical and mental health

Introduction:

The pandemic caused by the SARS Cov-2 virus strongly affected the functioning of the entire healthcare network in Croatia. From the beginning, employees in health care have been actively involved in various activities in the field of preparation, healthcare and prevention of the spread of infection in healthcare and the wider community. There were many activities in the field of work organization and staffing. It was necessary to adjust work schedules on a daily basis according to the current needs of patients and the number of staff available to provide care.

Some healthcare services are being compromised in order to meet the demands of caring for COVID-19 patients, and many people fear accessing healthcare facilities due to fear of acquiring of virus.

All the essential services are being delivered regularly in Croatia when clinically necessary. Antenatal and postnatal related services are not disrupted in Croatia due to the urgent need to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

During COVID-19 pandemics hospital visitations are selectively limited according to the epidemiologic situation in different regions in Croatia and for different periods of time. All patients being admitted to hospital are being tested for COVID-19.

Management of cancer patients during COVID 19 pandemic is always a priority although pandemics such as coronavirus disease (COVID 19) create new challenges in care of cancer patients.

Some specific areas of health care for women's sexual and reproductive health are presented below:

1. ***HBSC data on sexual health***

**Sexual Health**

Young people engage in sexual intercourse at an increasingly earlier age, although there are numerous studies, which confirm that they did not know enough about effective protection and their reproductive and sexual health. Early age of sexual activity during which young people are still developing both emotionally and cognitively, may increase their risk of unwanted and unplanned pregnancies and/or sexually transmitted infections, mainly due to misuse or non-use of condoms or others contraceptives.

In the HBSC survey, questions about sexuality where only asked to students age 15, since sexual intercourse in younger students is essentially a rarity.

For the question "Have you ever had sexual intercourse?" The possible answers were: "Yes and no".

If a young person decides to have sex, a mutually faithful relationship between two healthy people is the basis of protection against sexually transmitted diseases.

People who are not ready for a mutual relationship, and tend to change sexual partners more often, can only protect themselves from transmission of sexually transmitted diseases with regular and proper use of condoms. In many countries, 15-year-olds know that condoms are the most effective method of preventing sexually transmitted infections and method of contraception. Condom use should be consistent. Non-use of condoms is associated with other risky sexual behaviors, such as early onset of sexual activity, number of partners, sexual intercourse under the influence of drugs and alcohol. Condoms provide an effective method of preventing pregnancy.

For the question "Did you and your partner use a condom during the last sexual intercourse?" The possible answers were: "yes", "no", "I don't know".

**Croatia in 2018**

Of the surveyed students aged 15, 23.3% of boys and 6.1% of girls answered positively to the question whether they had sexual intercourse.

Of the surveyed students aged 15, 60.5% of boys and 50.0% of girls answered positively to the question whether they used a condom during their last sexual intercourse.

**Comparison with other countries in 2018**

In Croatia, 23.3% and 6.1% of 15-year-old boys and girls respectively, stated that they had sexual intercourse, which is a total of about 8% below the HBSC average for girls. On the scale of participating countries, this places us in 34th place, third from the bottom. Most boys and girls reported having sex in Greenland and Bulgaria, the least in Kazakhstan and Russia. In Croatia, 60.5% of boys and 50.0% of 15-year-old girls stated that they used a condom during their last sexual intercourse, which is a total of about 5% below the average for girls. This places us in the second half of the scale of the participating countries (32nd place). At the top of the scale are Spain and Greece, and at the bottom are Georgia and Armenia.

**Overview of the situation in Croatia from 2002 to 2018**

Following the results of previous surveys, since 2006 there has been a declining trend in those who stated that they had sexual intercourse. Considering the rankings of other countries, our results are constantly at the bottom from 26th place in 2006 to 39th place in 2014, and in 2018 we are in 34th place.

Comparing the results of previous surveys, in terms of condom use during the last sexual intercourse, there is a significant decline in the use of one during the 2018 survey cycle. Examining the rankings of the other countries, our results in 2002 were around the middle (16th place), 2006 and 2010 in the upper third (8th and 7th place), 2014 and 2018 in the second half (26th and 32nd place).

1. ***Counselling***

**Report on counselling services**

Before the pandemic, from 2004 to 2019, the sexual and reproductive health-counselling centre had an average of 405 visitors yearly showing a steady rise in visits every year. In 2019 the centre had 519 visitors.

During the pandemic, in 2020, there were 464 visitors. It is important to note that the centre was closed for two and a half months due to epidemiological measures in effect which made face-to-face visits impossible. Considering that fact, it can be concluded that there was no noticeable drop in the number of visitors to the counselling centre compared to earlier years.

That is why online access to sexual and reproductive health counselling services has been improved and promoted. In addition, more educational content on the topic of sexual and reproductive health was made available online for the public.

Although the counselling service centre was closed for face-to-face visits for two and a half months due to the pandemic, it was reopened to the public as soon as all prerequisites were met for safe continuation of its work. During the time it was closed, extra efforts were made to help everyone that needed its services through other means (counselling by telephone and e-mail). This approach was successful if we compare 125 online counselling sessions in 2019 to 182 online counselling sessions in 2020.

**Report on counselling services for children in school (consultations provided by school doctors):**

The number of primary and secondary school students' consultations with school doctors about reproductive health has grown to three school years, although the last two school years have been marked by a pandemic. Data for the last school year are not complete as they include data up to May. The number of consultations on reproductive health is shown in the below table:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 2018./2019. | 2.387 |
| 2019./2020. | 2.925 |
| 2020./2021. | 3.759 |

1. **Data from women's health service in primary health care in Croatia**

On 11 March 2019 the Minister of Health of the Republic of Croatia issued a Decision declaring an epidemic of COVID-19 disease in the Republic of Croatia and in order to protect the health of healthcare workers and patients, he recommended the maximum possible reduction of patients' visits to medical practices and to perform only urgent examinations and procedures during the epidemic. Additionally, it was recommended to increase the availability of telecommunication with patients through different telecommunication channels or other forms of communication (landline work telephone, mobile phone, SMS, videoconference calls and e-mail).

According to data from the Central Health Information System of the Republic of Croatia, the consequences of this decision are also visible in the data of women's health service in primary health care in Croatia. Namely, during 2020 a number of persons who sought health-care in the women's health service as well as the number of examinations has decreased compared to 2019; the number of persons who sought health-care fell by 13.4% (2019: 528,706; 2020: 457,687) and the number of examinations by 18.5% (2019: 851,247; 2020: 693,950). However, the average number of examinations per pregnant women stayed the same.

Total number of recorded Pap tests also show a decrease during 2020, 23.0% less than compared to 2019 (2019: 342.726; 2020: 263,828) and the number of family planning, infertility and/or preconception counselling sessions decreased by 11.6% (2019: 97,378; 2020: 86,084). The number of breast ultrasound examinations however, increased by 1.9% (2019: 19,019; 2020: 19.374).

It is important to emphasize that although the number of examinations and specific procedures decreased, the number of consultations provided by telephone and e-mail increased significantly, up to 55.1% (2019: 242,585; 2020: 376,300). It shows the rapid response of the health system to the new situation and greater use of telecommunications channels in regular communication with patients which helped in maintaining the access to health care similar to pre-epidemic conditions.

1. **Pregnancy related services**

According to data submitted from maternities (birth notifications), ˂ 1% parturient women did not undergo any antenatal visits in 2019 and 2020 and only 1.7% have undergone 1 -3 antenatal visits during the entire course of their pregnancy. The majority of pregnant women (70.3% in 2019; 69.1% in 2020) received adequate antenatal care, i.e. the standard number of examinations during pregnancy (≥ 9) in accordance with the programme of health care measures during pregnancy, childbirth and puerperium.

A significant indicator of antenatal care quality is the gestational age at the time of first visit, with the recommended optimal timeframe being up to 8 completed weeks of gestation. As per data in birth notifications, in 2019, 66% of all parturient women with data on gestational age at first visit, have visited their gynaecologist by the end of the 8th week of gestation; 92.5% of all parturient women have undergone such an examination by the 12th completed week of gestation. In the year 2020 the share of all parturient women with a recorded first antenatal visit by the end of 8th week of gestation was 82.3%, i.e. 91.6% by the 12th completed week of gestation.

**Access to abortion on demand**

Regarding access to safe and legal abortion in Croatia, the right to abortion on demand has been regulated by the Act on Health Care Measures to Achieve the Right to Decide Freely on Childbearing. Pursuant to provisions of the mentioned Act, all female individuals aged 16 and over are legally entitled to request an abortion in all hospital facilities providing gynaecological and obstetrical care. Consequent to numerous sexual health educational campaigns, the number of legally induced abortions has steadily decreased over the past three decades, although the annual number of recorded induced abortions has been somewhat stagnant over the past few years, as illustrated in the following table containing preliminary data on abortion incidence in Croatia in 2020.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **2018** | **2019** | **2020** |
| **Total number of abortions and miscarriages** | 7064 | 7687 | 7250 |
| **Number of legally induced abortions** | 2558 | 2703 | 2572 |
| **Percentage of legally induced abortions in the total number** | 36,2% | 35,2% | 35,5% |

Although citizens were advised to abstain from seeking non-urgent medical care, access to abortion remained largely unimpeded throughout the initial spring pandemic-related lockdown in force from mid-March to mid-May 2020, as illustrated in the following figure.

Note: the data on abortion incidence is subject to revision due to incomplete abortion records submitted by a number of hospitals in Croatia.

Moreover, per hospital treatment records administered by the Croatian Institute of Public Health, there haven’t been any cases of either hospital treatment or lethal outcome due to unsafe abortion in Croatia since the mid-nineties.

1. **Inpatient Health Care and Hospital Day Care**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2019 | | 2020 | |
| Number of hospitalisation in inpatient hospital wards | Number of hospitalisation in day care hospitals | Number of hospitalisation in inpatient hospital wards | Number of hospitalisation in day care hospitals |
| Inflammatory and noninflammatory disorders of female genital tract (ICD10: N70-N98) | 11818 | 17531 | 8219 | 13849 |
| Pregnancy with abortive outcome ICD 10: O00-O08 | 3397 | 3917 | 3232 | 4060 |
| Disorders in pregnancy, childbirth and the puerperium and delivery (ICD 10: O10-O99) | 44857 | 8495 | 42433 | 8356 |

Source: Croatian Institute of Public Health, Hospital Discharge Database

According to data from the Hospital Discharge Database in 2020 there were 8219 hospitalisations in inpatient hospital wards related to inflammatory and non-inflammatory disorders of female genital tract (in 2019 11,818 hospitalisation). In addition to the hospitalization at inpatient hospital ward statistics, in 2020 a total of 13,849 hospitalisations in day care hospitals were recorded (17,531 in 2019). In 2020, the total number of hospitalisations due to inflammatory and non-inflammatory disorders of female genital tract, as compared to the previous year, decreased by 12%.

Related to pregnancy with abortive outcome there were 3232 hospitalisations in 2020, while in 2019 there were 3397 hospitalisations. In day care hospitals there were 4060 hospitalisations in 2020 (3917 hospitalisations in 2019).

In 2020 there were 42,433 hospitalisations in inpatient hospital wards related to disorders in pregnancy, childbirth and the puerperium and delivery (44,857 in 2019). In addition to the hospitalisation of inpatient hospital ward statistics, a total of 8356 hospitalisations in day care hospitals in 2020 were recorded (8495 in 2019).

1. **The Register of HIV / AIDS**

According to the Register of HIV / AIDS, in the period from 1985, when the first cases of HIV infection were recorded in Croatia, by the end of 2020, a total of 1,827 people were diagnosed with HIV infection, of which 572 suffering from AIDS. In the same period, 235 people died of AIDS.

In 2020, 76 new cases of HIV infection were recorded, including 12 new cases of AIDS and 5 deaths from the consequences of AIDS. The rate of new diagnoses of HIV infection in 2020 was 1.9 per 100,000 inhabitants. In the last five years, the average number of newly diagnosed HIV / AIDS cases per year was 100 (range 76-110), which ranks Croatia among the countries with a low incidence of HIV infection at a rate of 1.9 per 100,000 inhabitants (5.4 / 100,000 is the average for EU / EEA countries in 2019).

The incidence of HIV infection in Croatia remained low, with a slight increase in newly diagnosed persons until 2015 (when the highest number of new HIV / AIDS reports was recorded - 117), and since 2015 we have recorded a decrease in the number of people with newly diagnosed HIV infection. The slight increase in the newly diagnosed cases of HIV infection in the period from 2003 to 2015 can be partly explained by the more successful detection of the infection by the increased availability of testing (in health care institutions and the community). The number of AIDS patients has a stable low incidence trend, thanks to the availability of antiretroviral therapy, which if successful, allows people living with HIV to have almost the same life expectancy as non-HIV-infected people. The number of deaths from HIV / AIDS is higher than in 2016, when the number was 8, while in 2020 11 people died from HIV / AIDS (Figure below).

Figure 1. Number of people suffering from HIV infection, AIDS and deaths from HIV / AIDS in Croatia by years, period 1985 – 2020

