

Appointed Consultations at Primary Health Care Level in Albania

Appointment System Triggered under Covid-19 Pandemic Shows Potential for Better Services

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Background

While scheduling consultations in primary health care settings is common in Western European countries, Albanian public health centres operate on a walk-in basis. These leads to several problems such as long waiting queues and overcrowded corridors particularly in the morning hours. To prevent the spread of Covid-19 infections a public health centre in Albania implemented an appointment system for patients with chronic condition(s), pregnant women, and children. Appointment systems are used to better plan and structure consultations for patients which should be seen by a doctor on a regular basis. The main goal is to deliver timely and convenient access to health care services for all patients.



Family nurses vaccinating a child (Copyright Bevis Fusha/MoHSP)

Study Design

In 2021, we evaluated the advantages and challenges as well as the costs of one of this first implemented appointment system in a primary health care centre in Albania. The employed qualitative approach included semi-structured in-depth interviews with the health centre managerial team, key health professionals and patients benefitting from the structured appointed system. A cost analysis of the appointment system was carried out as well.

Evaluation of the Albanian Appointment System

Advantages

- Improved handling of patients that are infected by the COVID-19 virus and organization of vaccination is possible.
- Quality of care is higher because there is time to prepare consultations and more dedicated time of the doctor to the patients during the consultations.
- Waiting time for patients is reduced. (from up to one hour to mostly five minutes)
- Thanks to the appointed consultations, a more efficient distribution of the workload throughout the day and the opening hours is possible. (About 66% of consultations are planned.)
- Less crowded and noisy corridors allow for calm and undisturbed consultations.

Challenges

- There is an additional administrative burden of arranging appointments.
- No-shows at the beginning of the implementation phase results in unproductive time.
- Sustainability of the system due to running costs of about 2'400 Swiss francs per year. However, these additional costs are offset by efficiency gains and quality improvements.

	Quantity	CHF
Maintenance of electronic agenda	13	122.-
Maintenance of phone system	13	26.-
Invoice for outgoing calls (limit)		17.-
Printing appointment cards	1'100	6.-
Paper-based agendas & table calendar	39	30.-
Total		201.-

Running costs of appointment system per month

Conclusions

Appointment systems in primary health care allow for an improved handling of patient influx during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond. It has a positive impact on the health service organization, efficiency of service provision and time available for patient-doctor interactions potentially leading to improved care. This positively influences the acceptance of the system among patients and health workers. A successful and sustainable appointment system in primary health care must be financed and supported properly with information technology (computers, electronic agenda) and good communication system (phone system).