Fostering population health research in a (post)pandemic Europe

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Population Health Information Research Infrastructure (PHIRI) 1 Year Anniversary

PHIRI celebrated its first anniversary on November 30th 2021, inviting all its consortium partners and key national and international stakeholders. PHIRI showcased the main outcomes of the project and put these outputs into perspective in order to fuel discussions around 3 themes that are at the core of PHIRI.

Theme 1: crisis preparedness & rapid policy and research responses.

"Is there tension between the research community and policy makers? Scientific evidence can have a lot of uncertainty.."
Herman Van Oyen (Scientific Director Sciensano)

It has always been a challenge to get results out fast to support policy decisions. To respond to urgent questions there needs to be strong foundations for national health (information) systems in place, together with national and international infrastructures (such as PHIRI) to enhance data sharing. To support data driven decision making, countries need solid data governance plans/systems. Knowledge brokering requires a system wide perspective and intersectoral approach to fuel an enhanced crisis response. Finally, rapid exchange of information between Member States has been valuable to support national decision making

"The objective should not be evidence-based policy but evidence-informed policies. And information has to be timely timely timely!"
Josep Figueras (Director European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies)

During the COVID-19 crisis, we observed an increase of positive engagement by citizens and an increase in health literacy. Involvement of the public will increase public trust and make public health communication and infodemic management more effective. That trust has to be carefully nurtured. Science needs to remain independent and can support policy.

Theme 2: research questions on the impact of COVID-19 on population health and future perspectives

As the vaccine coverage increases in most European countries, the wider implications of the pandemic are emerging. These effects reach well beyond the immediate mortality and morbidity aspects of COVID-19, a clear decrease of number of diagnoses was observed during the early phases of pandemic, but also include consequences on long term health and wellbeing.

"It is important to step out of our silos: we should understand what our fellow scientists are doing and advocate for research that others should carry out"
Martin McKee (Professor London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine)

It is important to maintain a multidisciplinary approach. New research questions should exploit the monitoring and surveillance systems that are already in place and aim to close the existing knowledge gaps and transfer research outcomes to the policy actions in a timely manner. However, we should keep an eye on the future through foresight studies.

Finally, the behavioral sciences have been under represented in existing studies into the pandemic; we need to understand why people do things (or do not do things!) to counteract negative influences such as misinformation. Furthermore, we need to increase our understanding of long-COVID and be prepared for its impact on the health care system in the long run.

Theme 3: a common vision on the future of facilitating the secondary use of health data

Secondary use is a term which refers to any use of data which goes beyond the purpose for which data was originally collected. Is this definition clear for everyone? National interpretations vary between countries and even between organizations within countries. A common terminology is important for a joint understanding.

> ***"Secondary use may refer to all types of reuse, beyond just research: we should open our minds for secondary use for research, for fostering innovations and for fueling policy making"***
> Louisa Stüwe (Ministry of Health France/ formerly at French Health Data Hub)

The current pandemic has demonstrated the need for secondary use of data and for effective sharing of data and/or results also cross the countries. Health data should be FAIR (findable, accessible, interoperable and reusable) at the national but also at the European level to support practical cross-national research, where the 'F' in fair is the most important step: if data is not findable, it cannot be reused. Public health requires wider perspective for health data than just patient data; also information on the undiagnosed and the population at risk is of importance.

> ***"We need to move from a #fragmented landscape to an integrated #ecosystem, where the #citizens are in control!"***
> Licínio Kustra Mano (DG Sante)

For the secondary use of data, trust is a must. There is a need to educate public on the use of health information for research purposes. The first challenge of setting up a European Health Data Space (EHDS) will be to establish a infrastructure which allows findability of health data in different countries. The second step is to support a one-stop-shop, such as the Health Information Portal, for access to data and harmonization of the secure analytic environment. The EHDS should provide an ecosystem with joint rules how to operate to ensure FAIR principles for health data.