

ARE THE HEALTHCARE POLICIES IMPLEMENTED IN CHINA AND EUROPE EFFECTIVE IN COMBATING FUTURE PANDEMICS?

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Abstract. *COVID-19 came unprecedented, exposing the challenges in the healthcare policies of the EU and China in combating the virus. China's zero COVID-19 policy, although effective in reducing COVID-19 transmissions, was criticized by both the public and healthcare professionals. The policy was only effective in the short term, and once China eased its lockdown, the COVID-19 cases surged. Also, the EU's digital COVID-19 certificates, although vital in determining the COVID-19 status of the visitors during the pandemic, are only acceptable in the EU member states and expose travelers to the risk of contracting the disease. For health policies to be effective in combating future pandemics, they require improvement by involving public members and enhancing global cooperation.*

Keywords: *EU digital COVID 19 certificates; zero-covid policy; quarantine; mass testing; Omicron variant*

1. Introduction

With the global pandemic of COVID-19 behind us, one lesson that nations can learn is that we live in unprecedented times. What started in Wuhan, China, spread rapidly to other parts of the world, putting pressure on the existing healthcare facilities and systems. Nations had to implement health policies and protocols to contain the spread of the virus. However, the lack of a better health contingency plan resulted in deaths in various parts of the world. Post-Covid, countries evaluated their health policies to determine practical areas and improvements. Europe and China, worst hit by the pandemic, need to reevaluate their health policies to decide whether or not they can effectively combat future pandemics.

2. Health policies in china during the pandemic

2.1. Zero-COVID policy

China implemented a zero-covid policy to prevent the spread of the virus. China, in its zero-covid policy-imposed lockdowns, mass testing, and quarantine to combat the spread of the virus (Ioannidis, 2022: 13-21). The zero-covid policy helped keep the infections in China lower than in many countries despite the virus originating in China.

Whereas China's zero-covid policy helped reduce COVID-19 transmission, it faced criticism from the public and healthcare professionals. Zero-COVID-19 was only effective in the short term; when China opened its borders, the COVID-19 cases

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surged. The policy sparked criticism from the members of the public, leading to the outbreak of countrywide protests. The protestors in Shanghai claimed that the zero-covid policy was restrictive and contravened their fundamental rights. The protestors claimed that they could only leave their homes after getting tests.



Fig. 1. Protestors protesting in Beijing against China's zero-covid policy

2.2. Nucleic acid testing throughout the city

With the emergence of the SARS-CoV-2 Omicron variant in 2022, the Chinese government set up nucleic acid testing to detect the virus. The nucleic acid test is a diagnostic test for the SARS-CoV-2 COVID-19 virus. Before the implementation of the policy, there was fear of widespread cases of undetected Omicron variant among the Chinese population. Detection was the Chinese intervention policy to identify the cases for appropriate action.

Subsequently, the Chinese government established 15-minute nucleic acid tests for the virus across Chinese capitals and cities with a population of more than 10 million to combat the virus's spread. The deployment of the nucleic acid test was appropriate because the Chinese citizens were required to walk for only 15 minutes from their homes or offices to receive the test. The healthcare professionals in China believed that the nucleic acid testing policy was appropriate for implementation in China because early detection of the virus could help promptly control the outbreak. Li Zhenjun, the director of China Communicable Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), lauded the nucleic acid testing health policy, saying that it would help establish the source of the infection and help control and prevent the epidemic (Jing, 2022:250).

Whereas the countrywide nucleic acid testing was largely successful in preventing and controlling the spread of the virus, it had some challenges that require improvement if it is to be used to combat future pandemics effectively. Firstly, there was a lack of standardized training among healthcare professionals in China. Efficiency in the nucleic acid tests resulted in non-standard operation. There were instances when Chinese citizens felt that healthcare professionals lacked professionalism. The fear of getting false results or being infected prevented the

citizens from being tested. Some citizens complained that the healthcare professionals failed to change gloves between tests and used disinfectant water, a standard of disinfecting. Also, the different levels of collection methods among the healthcare professionals created a possibility of failure to collect correct specimens, resulting in wrong results.

Secondly, the non-compliance behavior of the people in the testing queues caused virus transmission in the queues. The Chinese government notified its citizens that they appear for nucleic acid testing without adequate planning. The people who emerged for the testing violated COVID-19 protocols, resulting in infection of the people in the queues. Violating COVID-19 protocols like removing masks, failing to maintain social distancing, and spitting made many people favorable for the virus upon testing. The healthcare professionals conducting the tests were also infected along with the citizens.

Finally, there were inadequate resources to implement nucleic acid testing health policy. COVID-19 came unprecedented, forcing the Chinese government to implement the policy without adequate human resources. The staff available to undertake the tests was insufficient and could not effectively meet the demand. The Chinese government further lacked sufficient resources to recruit additional staff. The available staff who undertook the tests were overwhelmed, resulting in incompetency. Also, some test points were not adequately equipped with personal protective equipment like double-layer latex gloves and N95 masks. The lack of PPE risked the lives of many healthcare professionals in the line of duty, scaring others from joining the profession.

2.3. Forced quarantine for citizens returning home

Whereas the Chinese citizens abroad felt that home was the best place to be safe during the global pandemic of COVID-19, returning home was met by forced quarantine imposed by the Chinese government. In March 2020, China's State Health Administration, in collaboration with China's General Administration of Customs, launched mandatory quarantine for all Chinese students and workers returning home (Budzyn, 2022:15). Temperature screening was conducted at the entry points, and those found with symptoms of the virus were put in 14-day quarantine for medical observation.

Whereas the mandatory quarantine for those returning from abroad effectively minimized the virus's domestic spread, it faced challenges. The Chinese citizens returning home resented the move, claiming it was unfair and inconvenienced. Some even claimed that the screening devices were faulty, ending up in quarantine unjustly. Failure of the Chinese government to effectively explain the virus to the citizens resulted in resentment, making the health policy ineffective in meeting its objectives of containing the spread of the virus. Some of the people returning abroad escaped the authorities, leading to a lack of screening despite having symptoms of the virus. This resulted in the continued spread of the virus in China.

3. Health policies in eu during the pandemic

3.1. The EU digital COVID-19 certificate

The certificates told whether one was vaccinated against the virus, positive, or recovered. The EU digital COVID-19 certificate allowed citizens to move across the

EU countries (Halpin, 2022:29). However, the EU digital COVID-19 certificates were only accepted in EU member states. Due to lockdowns, EU citizens who wished to travel to other non-EU member states could not be allowed. The EU digital COVID-19 certificates also threatened the lives of many EU citizens. COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease, and human interactions result in the spread of the disease.

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3.2. Providing COVID-19 vaccines

The EU adopted a collaborative effort to vaccinate its citizens across the region. The EU authorized four COVID-19 vaccines for use in the area. To ensure the production of sufficient effective vaccines in the area, the EU signed agreements with vaccine developers and initially secured 4.6 million vaccines for use in the region. The EU aimed to vaccinate 70 percent of the union's citizens by mid-2022. The vaccination health policy within the EU region also saw the donation of COVID-19 vaccines to countries that could not afford the vaccines.



Fig. 2. A woman undertaking COVID-19 Vaccine in Europe

Whereas the COVID-19 vaccination health policy was meant to boost the immunity of the EU's population, vaccine hesitancy remained a significant problem in the region. EU citizens had limited confidence in the effectiveness of the vaccines. The side effects of the COVID-19 vaccines and misconceptions on social media regarding the efficacy of the vaccines made few people within the EU turn for vaccinations. France and Hungary faced the highest vaccine resistance within the EU region. The EU's effort to roll out vaccination programs instead of sensitization on the vaccines' effectiveness led to public resentment. The EU did little to build confidence in vaccines before the onset of the pandemic.

4. What china and eu need to undertake to ensure the health policies are effective in combating future pandemics

Analysis shows that the health policies implemented in China and Europe, despite successfully combating the virus, had certain limitations that limited their effectiveness in tackling the spread of the virus. In developing health policies that will

effectively deal with future pandemics, the EU and China need to undertake the following measures.

4.1. Investing in healthcare professionals

Implementing the health policies in China and Europe was ineffective because of limited human resources. For health policies to effectively combat future pandemics, the EU and China should invest in healthcare professionals. The presence of adequate healthcare professionals effectively prevents the spread of the virus. If the EU had had enough healthcare professionals, the virus would not have spread to the levels witnessed, leading to massive deaths. Investing in healthcare professionals needs to start by admitting more students to healthcare institutions. Also, existing healthcare professionals should be motivated to arouse more interest in students joining the profession. Lack of morale among the healthcare professionals while combating the spread of the virus led the students who had claimed to pursue healthcare courses to lose interest. Enhancing the appeal of the professionals will increase delight in joining the profession.

4.2. Availing medical resources

Resources for combating the spread of the virus are adequate for making health policies effective. For the health policies to be effective, accompanying resources must be available. Lack of PPE during the implementation of the policies risked the lives of healthcare professionals. In effectively combating future pandemics, China and the EU should ensure that PPE is always available in all healthcare facilities. Assessments of the healthcare facilities need to be conducted to ensure that the PPE is available all the time. The PPE should be available in advance and not be sourced when the pandemic emerges. During pandemics, there is high demand for PPE, resulting in inadequate supply. Also, ventilators are vital in saving lives during pandemics. The majority of the people in China died because of a lack of adequate ventilators to save lives. In some instances, people in critical conditions had to wait for the ventilators to be available for use. The health policies in China and the EU would have been more successful if the necessary resources were available.

4.3. Sensitizing the public

The public needs to be sensitized on the effectiveness of the health policies and why they are being implemented. In the digital age of communication, social media is a powerful tool that can cause misconceptions and miscommunication, leading to the ineffectiveness of health policies. Sensitizing the public is critical to reducing the level of resistance (Marion, 2020:201). The sensitization process should be conducted when the pandemic emerges and in advance to prepare people for future pandemics. The sensitization programs should focus on correcting the misconceptions and providing the relevant information. The resentments in the EU and China during the implementation of the policies would have been minimized if the members of the public were effectively sensitized.

4.4 Public participation

Involving members of the public is critical in ensuring less resentment of the health policies. The policies are intended to help the members of the people; their involvement is essential to reducing resistance during implementation. China, in

formulating health policies like zero COVID policy, should seek the opinions of the members of the public to avoid resentment (Sobczak, Marharyta, Pawliczak, 2023:10).

4.5. Global cooperation

China and Europe must cooperate with other nations to ensure that health policies effectively combat future pandemics. Pandemics are global and affect all parts of the world. Practical cooperation is effective in reducing the devastating effects of the pandemic. Beneficial international cooperation helps provide critical information that is key to preventing pandemics. EU should cooperate with other countries to formulate effective health policies will be effective in the future.

5. Conclusion

Although effective during the pandemic and could help prevent future pandemics, the health policies implemented by the EU and China have specific weaknesses that require improvement to be more effective. Formulating health policies needs to involve the public to avoid resentment during implementation. Also, the EU and China should cooperate with other countries when implementing health policies because the world is a global village, and what affects one part of the world can affect the entire world.

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