

Evolution of Primary Health Care appointments in mainland Portugal in 2020

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Background:

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on the Portuguese Health Care System. During the first months of the pandemic, there was a great reduction in the number of health rendering services. (1) The aim of this study is to analyse the evolution of Primary Health Care appointments in mainland Portugal, during the whole year of 2020 and to compare it to the period of 2015-2019. The type of appointment and the number of users will also be characterized.

Methods:

An observational, descriptive-retrospective, longitudinal, quantitative study was performed. 'Portal da Transparência' was used as the source of free access data about the Portuguese National Health Service.

Results:

The results which are here presented are comparing the year 2020 to the average of 2015-2019. In mainland Portugal, in 2020, there were 7% more Primary Health Care appointments (PHCA). Although there were less PHCA during the first five months of 2020, there was a rise in the number of PHCA since June 2020. In 2020, 59% were distance PHCA, a rise of 113% compared to the average of 2015-2019. There was a fall of 38% on presential PHCA in 2020. The number of presential PHCA was inferior in each month of 2020, in comparison to the homologous month of the average of 2015-2019. The month with less presential PHCA was April 2020 (less 72% than the average of 2015-2019). Regarding domiciliary PHCA, there was a 36% reduction. In mainland Portugal, the number of Primary Health Care users with, at least, one face-to-face or distance PHCA, in 2020 was 6,661,927, 3% less than the average of 2015-2019.

Conclusions:

The transition from presential PHCA to distance PHCA that occurred in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic allowed the follow-up of most of the patients. However, there is a need to assess if distance PHCA are as effective as presential PHCA and which are its effects in communities' health.

(1) Vieira A et al. Excesso de mortalidade, mortalidade colateral e resposta dos serviços de saúde em Portugal em tempos de COVID-19

Key messages:

- In 2020, in mainland Portugal, there was an increase on distance Primary Health Care appointments and a decrease on presential ones.
- Its impact on population's health should be assessed.