

Caring for Long COVID patients in primary health care: a cross-sectional study among general practitioners in Belgium and Malta

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Background and Objective: At least 10% of COVID-19 recovered individuals experience persistent symptoms (Long COVID), with primary health care and general practitioners (GPs) at forefront in their care. In this study, GPs' knowledge, perception and experience on Long COVID, and the definition used across two countries are investigated to provide insight in their care at cross-country level.

Methods: A cross-sectional study targeting GPs was conducted in Belgium and Malta during mid-2022. An online survey on Long COVID was disseminated. Country-specific practice and demographic characteristics were collected. Descriptive and logistic regression analyses were performed.

Results: A total of 150 GPs (Belgium=105; Malta=45) responded. Female GPs represented 58.0%, median age was 49 years (IQR: 37-61). In both countries, two in three GPs felt that Long COVID patients were not well followed up by primary care. Most GPs reported insufficient scientific knowledge and information on Long COVID diagnosis and treatment. Accessibility to educational material was limited and an awareness-rising campaign is merited, especially in Malta (OR=6.81, 95%CI [1.49;31.12]). For diagnosing Long COVID, 54.7% reported the requirement of a positive COVID-19 test, especially among Belgian than Maltese GPs (64.3% vs 45.2%, p=0.036). To assess Long COVID, GPs mainly implemented diagnostic criteria by themselves (47.3%) together with persistence of symptoms (4 weeks to 5 months). 76.0% GPs reported caring for Long COVID patients, irrespective of practice type and GPs' country, sex or age (p=0.353; p=0.241; p=0.194; p=0.058). 48.3% of GPs reported to follow-up these patients by themselves or GP colleagues and 29.8% by multidisciplinary cooperation.

Conclusions: At cross-country level, most GPs provide similar (multidisciplinary) care to Long COVID patients. Although GPs perceive lack of scientific knowledge and training on Long COVID, similar diagnostic criteria were noted. Uniform guidelines, scientific support and training for GPs across Europe is a priority to augment their Long COVID approach.

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