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Bitá Pejam
Western University, bpejam@uwo.ca

Jennifer Lam
Western University, jlam428@uwo.ca

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Impact of Covid-19 on the Italian and American Healthcare Systems A Comparative Assessment

Jennifer Lam and Bitu Pejam
Western University

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Abstract: This report aims to examine and assess the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic on the healthcare systems of the United States of America and Italy; two of the most heavily affected nations. Using data from December 2019 to January 2021, several consultations, and policy reviews, we identify risks and notable areas of issue in each nations' approach to combating the virus. We focus our report particularly on the health policies and the governmental structures in place that contributed to each nations' initial method of alleviating the impact of COVID-19. Our report compares the two healthcare systems and proposes a list of mitigation strategies for each respective country to consider implementing in order to alleviate the risks and impact of future pandemics and systemic consequences.

Keywords: COVID-19; Italy; the United States of America; market-based system; federal system; health policy; healthcare system

I. Introduction

As of January 2021, there are over 22 million cases of COVID-19 combined between Italy and the United States. With the growing rate of cases in both countries, each respective health care system has been impacted in various ways. With administrative and structural differences in health care systems, each country's approach to the global pandemic has been distinct. Ill-prepared health care systems in place have created the commonality of large surges in cases in both countries. The question is, with existing differences in each healthcare system, what have both countries learned from this pandemic, and how will these countries move on to post-pandemic life.

II. Background

COVID-19 is an infectious disease that is airborne and can infect individuals through respiratory droplets. The virus is infectious through the nose, mouth, lungs, eyes and hands. The disease was first detected in Wuhan, China in early December of 2019, before rapidly spreading across the globe. Since then, variations of the virus have been detected and many questions still remain unanswered, however, it is without question that this global pandemic has drastically impacted the healthcare systems of both the United States and Italy.

III. The United States of America

A. Country Profile and Healthcare System

The United States of America is populated with over 330 million individuals; and shares borders with Canada and Mexico. The U.S. holds a federal governmental system in which there are two representative legislative bodies. These bodies consist of the Senate and the House of Representatives. In the U.S., the executive branch consists of the President, Vice President, Cabinet and independent agencies. With a geographic area of over 9.3 million square kilometres, the nation is known as the fourth-largest country in the world. The country exercises strong influence on the global stage, possessing great economic and military power and maintaining a prominent role in several international alliances. In terms of the nation's healthcare system, the country holds a market-based system. This model of healthcare entails minimal government intervention and pricing of health care goods and services. As a consequence of this model, the United States experiences drastic inequalities amongst its citizens when it comes to accessing healthcare services and resources. The lack of governmental regulation has led to high-priced health services and medication. Over the years, there has been several attempts at healthcare reform and an increased demand for universal healthcare amongst citizens.

B. Covid-19 Impact

One of the most pressing issues that the United States currently faces is the growing concern surrounding the affordability of healthcare. Given that a market-based system arguably only benefits high-income earners, it has created a disparity for low to middle-class individuals. Healthcare in the United States is considered a privilege by many, creating vast inequalities. The emergence and effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have further displayed these issues within the American system. For instance, when compared to the Italian system, vast differences can be identified in government approaches to administering Covid-19 testing. With a two-tiered system, Italy is able to offer free COVID-19 testing for individuals who are exposed to the virus, show symptoms, or require testing for travel purposes. Should an individual request a test for any other reason, the country will offer testing for \$22 to \$30 (18 to 25 euros). This diminishes rates

of inequality in Italy, as any individual is able to access free testing should they need it, or pay a low cost. The United States, on the other hand, has a significantly different set up for COVID testing, as individuals may be required to pay anywhere between \$20 to \$850 for a test. For individuals who have insurance, test kits may be available for a lower cost, as insurance companies will reimburse the amount spent on a test. It is critical to note, however, that within a market-based system, not everyone is able to afford health insurance and coverage, and as a consequence, may be required to pay large sums for health-related services. This has further consequences for the overall spread of the virus in the country; as many individuals avoid getting tested due to the cost and as a result, may likely carry the virus and spread it to others. This lack of testing can account for an inaccurate estimation and disclosure of the number of cases in the U.S., leading to difficulties of contact tracing.

Another area of concern for the United States during the pandemic has been the mandating of masks. As previously highlighted, COVID-19 is easily spread through nasal passages. One of the best solutions to containing the spread of the virus has been the requirement of wearing face masks. This has been easily instructed and enforced in the majority of nations across the globe, however, has been more difficult in the United States given their governmental system and minimal intervention in healthcare. The federal government is not involved in enforcing mask mandates, but rather, leaves it to the responsibility of state governments. This disparity and divided agenda between the federal and state governments has made it difficult to enforce a united front on the subject of mandatory mask wearing. For instance, the states of Florida, Arizona and Alaska do not have a mandate on face masks. With some states requiring face masks, and others not, there exists a fractured policy agenda in the country. The federal system allows states to exercise a level of independence and jurisdiction over certain sectors and policies, included in those is healthcare. The disunited policy for mask mandates has led to surges of COVID-19 cases in various regions of the country.

Overall, the model of a market-based healthcare system has created long-standing economic disparities between different groups of individuals in the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened these disparities as many are unable to access the testing, care, and services required to minimize the spread of the virus and account for the accurate number of cases. Further, the divide between the federal and state governments has led to inconsistent agenda setting, most notably with respect to the mask mandate, leading to surges in the spread of cases in various states. To date, the United States government has agreed to two stimulus checks, the first distributing \$1200 and the second for \$600. The nation is taking steps to rebuilding the economy by helping citizens return to work and obtain the funding they require to pay for resources and services. The pandemic has caused a significant economic downfall, drastically hitting several industries and the overall job market. As many Americans have struggled to economically survive this pandemic, the United States stimulus package is evidently not sufficient enough to account for individuals who find themselves suddenly unemployed. The

cost of living is greater than the stimulus checks being administered, requiring further support and intervention by the government in combating the economic effects of the pandemic.

C. Proposed Mitigation Strategies

With the current attempts and initiatives implemented by the United States, it is apparent that there are several valid solutions to mitigating the damage caused by the pandemic. In alleviating the concerns and circumstances that many Americans are facing, the following list of proposed strategies will allow the United States to contain the spread of the virus and reduce the mental anguish on its citizens.

1. Within their market-based healthcare system, the U.S. government should provide the option for low-cost COVID-19 testing for citizens. Government funded testing would allow for a greater number of citizens to access testing, increasing contact tracing and reducing overall contraction.
2. The federal and state governments should enhance coordination and work alongside one another to enforce policies with a united front, particularly mask mandates. Leaders should enforce a homogenous policy agenda to reduce the number of cases in the nation.
3. Revise and increase economic stimulus packages in an attempt to aid low-income and middle-class individuals throughout the pandemic. Stimulus and funding programs should be provided to those who have lost their employment as a result of the pandemic. Various social initiatives may help re-stimulate the national economy post-pandemic.

IV. Italy

A. Country Profile and Healthcare System

With a growing population of over 60 million people as of 2020, Italy is one of the world's most highly developed nations. Known for their "Dolce Vita" lifestyle of pleasure and luxury, citizens enjoy a relatively high standard of living when compared to other European nations. Located in Southern Europe on the Apennine Peninsula, Italy shares borders with France, Austria, Slovenia, and Switzerland. The country oversees two of the largest Mediterranean islands, Sardinia and Sicily, and is home to the Vatican City, an independent state that seats the Roman Catholic Church and is the Catholic population's spiritual home.

Following the barbarian invasions' succession, the Roman Empire fell, and the Italian Republic entered into a fascist dictatorship. It wasn't until 1946 when Italy replaced its monarch with a democratic republic and adopted a multiparty system. In the 1990s, the party system underwent a radical transformation, leaving behind a right-left polarization. Currently, the Italian

parliament is a bicameral legislature that consists of the Senate and the House of Representatives. The head of state is the President, with the executive power being exercised by the Council of Ministers led by the Prime Minister. Despite facing a multiplicity of national problems, Italy maintains a strong presence in European organizations and on the international stage. They have been a longtime member of the European Union, the Council of Europe and have maintained a strong presence in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Economic Community (EEC).

Italian citizens, on average, experience a high standard of living, quality of life, and a high average life expectancy; 79 years for men and 85 years for women. Italy provides public healthcare and also offers private care options for its wealthier citizens. Their national health service, known as Servizio Sanitario Nazionale (SSN), ensures universal coverage free of charge to all residents. Private healthcare is available for citizens who prefer private insurance over the basic state coverage provided. This option allows individuals to choose their doctors and specialists and provides them the option of being treated at private hospitals. Italy's federal and regional governments have their respective jurisdictions where healthcare is concerned. The national government ensures that the healthcare system's fundamental principles are met and the regional governments are responsible for the actual delivery of the benefits packages to citizens.

B. Covid-19 Impact

Italy was one of the first nations drastically impacted by COVID-19 and, to date, has accumulated over three million cases, with over 2.6 million recovered. With over 70,000 deaths as a consequence of the virus, the nation has faced a massive burden. One potential reason for Italy's significant hit by the virus can be attributed to the fact that the country is home to a large population of senior citizens – a demographic which is most notably impacted by COVID-19. The pandemic not only significantly affected Italy's citizens but it has also had drastic effects on the stability of the nation's healthcare system. In the most affected regions of the country, Italy's public healthcare service was close to completely collapsing. The near collapse of the system and its overall instability could be attributed to years of fragmentation, and decades of financial cuts, privatization, and deprivation of technical resources. Given that the healthcare service administration is regionally based, local authorities are therefore responsible for the organization and delivery of health services during times of crisis. Like many other nations worldwide, Italy's healthcare system was ill-prepared to take on the demanding nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, as the government faced over 37 billion euros in financial cuts in the past decade alone. The result of financial cuts and minimal resources left the Italian government with a weak strategic plan and poor leadership in combating the virus in its early stages, however, has since been successful in controlling the virus.

C. Proposed Mitigation Strategies

While the Italian government has since efficiently combatted the virus in an efficient manner, reducing the rate of exposure and cases contracted dramatically, several lessons are to be extracted from their initial experience. The following mitigation strategies could be implemented by the Italian government in terms of leadership and strategy moving forward to avoid detrimental effects in future years.

- 1) The Italian decentralization and fragmentation of its health services have limited timely interventions and overall effectiveness. Stronger national coordination should be in place between national and regional responsibilities to ensure the effective delivery and administration of health services.
- 2) Public healthcare systems should acquire greater capacity and financing to take into account exceptional emergencies and unforeseen crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3) In response to such immediate problems, the private and public sectors should strive to develop a stronger partnership and move towards being more institutionalized. This will ensure consistency and uniformity across the healthcare system and will allow for more effective implementation of policies in future years.
- 4) Consistent management, decision-making and a strong political commitment by leaders, are needed to create a more sustainable system for future years. Therefore, the recruitment of human resources and training initiatives must be accounted for and adequately financed with long-term strategies in place.

V. Conclusion

As of 2021, there have been over 100 million COVID-19 cases worldwide. Italy accounts for nearly three million of these cases, and the United States for approximately 30 million. Although this unprecedented crisis impacted each nation in distinct ways, the mitigation strategies proposed will allow for more cautious approaches and greater preparedness in combating future health crises. Although our comparative analysis's focus and scope is limited and targeted towards the effects that the pandemic has had on Italy and the United States of America, we strongly believe that the mitigation strategies proposed are further applicable to other nations as well. Ensuring that governments are equipped with the necessary resources, training, and leadership strategies will lessen the effects of unforeseen healthcare issues in coming years.

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