

Access to care during the COVID-19 Pandemic in France. Results from the SAPRIS Cohort Study

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Abstract

The first challenge for the healthcare systems during the COVID-19 pandemic is to reduce congestion of health service provision in intensive care units. In France, preventive measures have been implemented to reduce the number of cases: patients with COVID-19 symptoms were called to stay at home and only to call emergency service during the first stage of lockdown, most of elective care were postponed and telemedicine was progressively implemented and generalised. Patients' fear of contamination may have led them to forgo healthcare as well. As a consequence, a dramatic reduction in health service use has been observed during the first lockdown.

Based the SAPRIS survey conducted among participants aged 18 to 69 of the representative CONSTANCES cohort, the paper explores the determinants of health care use during lockdown. Has the rationing of care and the reorganisation of health systems generated difficulties to provide access to care to individuals with COVID-19 symptoms and to meet other health care needs? Was the public health policy implemented during the pandemic able to provide a more equal access to health care to individuals with COVID-19 symptoms than to individuals with other health care needs?

Multivariate probit and Heckman modelling provide evidence of pro-poor inequalities in access for patients with COVID-19 symptoms and pro-rich inequalities for other needs, in particular in hospital care, despite social inequalities in both types of healthcare needs. Results suggest social inequalities in forgone care as well. Forgone care is mainly explained by supply shortages, but the progressive implementation of telemedicine seems to have mitigated this rationing.

Overall, public health policies and the reorganisation of the health system seem to have been effective in order to reduce social inequalities in access to care for patients with COVID-19, but in a lesser extent for patients with other needs.