

The National Helpline during the COVID-19 Pandemic: a pillar of support for the public

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Abstract

Background

Soon after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Malta in March 2020, the number of calls from the public escalated so much that a helpline service, Helpline 111, was set at a private call centre. Calls from the public were answered by a team of trained agents, supported onsite by officials from the Public Health Response Team. The reasons for the calls varied and guidelines for answering the calls were continuously updated in line with the current standards and mitigation measures.

Methods

A qualitative analysis of the e-mail communication between the public health team and the leads of the agents from September 2020 to September 2021 was conducted. Thematic analysis of the calls was conducted.

Results

The public contacted Helpline 111 as the first point of reference for a variety of matters related to Covid-19. Categories of reasons for calling included swabbing, quarantine issues, travel, social issues and mental health problems. Impacts of the mitigation measures included people on quarantine needing to feed animals, travellers staying in the quarantine hotel and persons not able to be with their dying members of the family. Social problems were common and included household members leaving home due to domestic violence, homeless persons, cases being kicked out of their home or rented accommodation and children being shifted between parents.

Psychological and mental health difficulties included loneliness, anxiety and suicidal calls. Callers were supported and guided to access specialised services as needed. The information from the calls helped to give feedback to inform policy decisions and for prioritisation of services.

Discussion

The Helpline supported and guided the public to access the required services related to COVID-19 and to implement the mitigation measures. The Helpline was a link to the human element of the pandemic and supported the public through this difficult time. The calls gave a deep insight into the impact of the pandemic and the experience of the public.

Conclusions

The public was a major stakeholder of the COVID-19 pandemic. Helpline 111 received calls from all sectors of society and was a first point of reference for members of the public. The impact of the pandemic went beyond numbers and trends of positive cases and deaths. Lessons learnt from the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic should be considered when making recommendations for the management of future pandemics.

Message

Helpline 111 was an integral component of the public health response and support to the public during the COVID-19 pandemic. It informed the public and bridged the digitisation gap.

Permission to publish

Yes