



## A report on Qatar's national response to COVID-19

COVID-19 has a devastating and relentless global impact, sparing no country regardless of their wealth and resources. It encroached upon every individual and disrupted daily living for everyone. The infection has spread across the world to more than 182 countries at an unprecedented rate, making it an unparalleled crisis for government agencies of all countries. It left its mark upon Qatar just the same, reaching its peak on May 20, 2020. We have identified more than 150,000 cases and estimated over 1,000,000 people have been infected so far in a total population of about 2.8 million: mortality remained relatively low since we registered 233 deaths during the whole course of the epidemic. .

Throughout the crisis, the goal has been to reduce the rate of transmission of the infection and the number of deaths associated with COVID-19. At the same time, we aimed at maintaining the provision of essential health services to the population during the pandemic. By the time COVID-19 was declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2020, we had already began developing and implementing stringent measures to actively contain the spread of the virus following the recommendations and guidance from the World Health Organization (WHO).

In our response to the epidemic we followed the approach defined in the Qatar Vision 2030, which aims to attain optimum public health through implementation of sound and empirically tested and proven, best practices in healthcare by utilizing cutting edge tools and the exceptional skills of healthcare professionals. We benefited from the competence and expertise of scientists across the health sector as well as the input of the WHO Qatar collaborating center on Disease Epidemiology and Analytics on HIV/AIDS, Sexually Transmitted Infections, and Viral Hepatitis at Weill Cornell Medicine-Qatar. Based on the indications received by WHO EMRO and HQ, Qatar's response to COVID-19 was guided



primarily by WHO's relevant guidelines and recommendations. We used this essential background to develop more than 100 documents including policies, clinical guidelines and education materials for all aspects of the response to COVID-19.

Qatar serves as a hub for trade and travel for over 100 destinations globally. From the outset, Qatar took a determined cross-Government approach implementing an integrated National Response Action Plan. In leading our nation's response to Covid-19, the Ministry of Public Health worked to apply the full capabilities of the rich diversity and depth of knowledge, experience and ingenuity of Qatar's health sector and our country's resources by prioritizing immediate isolation and treatment of cases, prevention and control of infection, contact tracing and instituting quarantine for all the suspected cases.

To further limit the transmission of the virus amongst the population, we imposed stringent social measures including restrictions on travel and movements, closing borders, schools, and non-essential companies, suspending mass gatherings, and enforcing a partial curfew. We believe that these non-pharmaceutical public health interventions limited and delayed the spread of infection and successfully reduced the rate of transmission bringing Covid-19 under reasonable control.

The successful reduction of social movements was further strengthened by the adoption and universal use of the Ehteraz application. This tool has facilitated the control of compliance with quarantine and isolation and helped ensuring security, health and safety of our residents. We bolstered our capacity for testing for the presence of SARS-CoV2 progressively increasing the volume of tests performed in our laboratory up to 20,000 tests per day. These efforts were supported by the internationally aggregated, extensive knowledge and experience shared by WHO, which proved to be a vital factor in our fight against the virus. Additionally, we used another tool named "Kashif" for the collection of relevant demographic and exposure data for people undergoing swabs for Covid-19. This is a tool to facilitate rapid tracking and treatment of positive cases. The Kashif app uses scanning technology for error-free data entry, immediate OTP verification, and real-time



data verification and integration with different databases associated to our healthcare system.

Similarly, we swiftly deployed our mobile testing units, which were stationed at all the sensitive areas most impacted by the virus. Through them we detected a large number of the cases especially the Industrial Area and managed to conduct rapid investigation of clusters as well take actions accordingly to contain the spread of the disease.

Indeed, the population most impacted by Covid-19 has been that of migrant workers who come from various ethnic backgrounds and have been instrumental in the development and growth of Qatar over the recent years. We developed specific guidelines both for the population of single male laborers (SMLs) and for other vulnerable groups such as the elderly, and people with special needs. Mental health issues were also considered and addressed in relationship with the impact of quarantine and isolation.

We implemented rigorous full-scale testing and examination procedures to identify both symptomatic and asymptomatic individuals, house them in quarantine and isolation and providing them with free food and accommodation to ensure their complete wellbeing. As a way of supporting the population and respond to queries and concerns, we set up a dedicated phone number (16000): this also helped identifying suspected cases and direct them for testing and assessment by dedicated medical teams. This comprehensive, multi-faceted approach also served to prevent and mitigate an overwhelming demand towards our health centers and hospitals so that priority could be given to the COVID-19 patients, particularly those suffering complications. The immunization program for seasonal influenza was strengthened and coverage extended. We put special attention to mental health of vulnerable population such as children, the elderly and those who work in front lines like health care workers, the hospitality sector and retail industry.



Our strategy was articulated in a National Plan. This set an authoritative framework for collaborative action across various level of government as well as its partners and stakeholders; it particularly called for the timely sharing of information and knowledge to enable high quality decision making. For example, we have used our CERNER network of medical records across hospitals and health centers (Hamad Medical Hospital and Primary Healthcare Corporation) to integrate existing information and avoid duplications and overlapping among different levels of care. In addition, in order to ensure that our healthcare providers acted on the most up to date evidence available, we facilitated and encouraged the participation in online training sessions made available by WHO and other accredited health institutions. Those who trained in turn trained their colleagues helping the dissemination of the latest best practices available for use during this pandemic.

The State of Qatar not only relied on the expertise and skills of its health professionals to control the epidemic, but called on the collaboration of its residents as well. From day one, we adopted complete transparency with our people, and fully communicated to them the risks of COVID-19 and what they could do to help the health system response and each other. Volunteers were called upon to aid in our daily fight to contain this disease; we disseminated information material to the public to foster positive behavior. We received an amazing, heartfelt response from those who were willing to step to the front lines showing a concrete and factual solidarity to our healthcare organizations and workers.

We believe that this truly seamless and amazing interconnected level of teamwork, professionalism and communication across health system and within the society at large has contributed to minimize the impact of the epidemic in our community: despite a large number of cases, Qatar has experience a case fatality rate of 0.15%, one of the lowest in the world, and our healthcare system was never overwhelmed, despite the large spread of the disease. A number of factors have contributed to this achievement, including the young age of our population, but we believe that the preparation of our health system



and the professionalism of all health care professionals has given the most important contribution. The protection of health care workers towards COVID-19 has been one of our greatest concern. We have secured PPE equipment to all during the whole course of the epidemic and this, together with access to frequent testing, allowed us to keep the number of cases among health care workers low and manageable.

We strongly believe that this global threat to health requires a global response. With this in mind, the Qatar Fund For Development (QFFD) and its partners have aptly responded to the call for solidarity made by WHO to help meeting the needs of the developing nations. Qatar Fund for Development, along with its partners such as the Government of Qatar, Qatar Red Crescent, and Qatar Airways, has successfully shipped aid to 82 countries, including medical equipment, PPEs, and food supplies.

Global solidarity applies also to research and development. Qatar is participating in the solidarity 2 study. A complete understanding of the epidemiology and global risk posed by SARS-CoV-2 requires systematic serologic testing. By conducting surveys among different populations around the world, we can together understand the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn will allow local, national, and international decision-makers to better respond to the pandemic.

As part of the EMRO WHO, Qatar has been adamant in its duty to share all its information in our joint battle against COVID-19 as stipulated in International Health Regulations.

Whilst tackling the pandemic, we extensively planned for the lifting of restrictions to restore social activities, return to our daily lives, and revitalize our economy and our business sectors. Four phases for lifting restrictions were developed based on scientific information and progressively implemented. Specific indicators were used to move from one phase to another.



This plan and detailed advance planning proved to be very effective. The indicators used referred to epidemiological data, healthcare capacity and public health factors. The plan was carefully explained to the public before its implementation to ensure full collaboration and restore normal life while keeping the epidemic at bay. Our vigilance enabled us to take carefully targeted action in response to any resurgence of the infection or clusters. At the same time, however, we have also developed a contingency plan, for the gradual re-escalation of restrictions should it be necessary although we hope that we will never be in the positions to apply it.

As we proceed in our collective endeavor to contain and hopefully one day to eliminate the virus, in the meantime, we suggest further strengthening the response efforts by ensuring that the following recommendations are implemented:

- As this pandemic has demonstrated, it is absolutely essential to build capacities for effective preparedness and response to prevent and mitigate public health emergencies, make health systems more flexible to maintain basic health services and ensure the sustainability of development plans.
- Based on our awareness and knowledge of the public health threats posed by emerging infectious diseases, as well as their economic and social impact, we recommend increased investment in improving national capacities for preparedness and response, in accordance with the International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005).
- Despite the considerable efforts made at various national and international levels, the timely exchange of detailed information about the COVID-19 cases remains a great challenge that requires countries to cooperate and coordinate with the World Health Organization.
- Existing influenza surveillance and laboratory systems must be strengthened as part of the surveillance and investigation system for emerging



respiratory pathogens that may bear similarities to SARS-CoV-2 and its associated impact.

- Prioritize, establish and support effective national infection control programs and guarantee the consistent application of comprehensive control measures in health care settings.
- It is essential to protect the capacity of health systems to respond quickly in the event of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases with adequate investments and resources. This is also necessary to maintain the continuity of basic health services during and after the pandemic.
- The need to develop educational materials and messages and manage the negative impact of misleading and wrong information through proactive and effective communication strategies. These should follow best practices and ensure the participation of partners to increase public awareness and encourage positive behavior for optimum mental and physical health.

For any great undertakings of this magnitude, it is not possible for any country to act in isolation. A global solidarity is essential to control and defeat this disease and other similar threats which may emerge in the future. This is a battle that can be won if we stand united in our actions to protect our families and our peoples.