The COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed unprecedented disruption to our lives and health systems. In this context, countries across Europe have responded with ingenuity and resourcefulness to these challenges. Importantly, we have seen that by working together, across Europe and globally, we can learn from and support each other through this crisis and beyond to help build more resilient health systems. In this special issue of Eurohealth, published to coincide with the start of the French Presidency of the Council of the European Union in January 2022, we explore these themes – resilience, solidarity and European cooperation – and how they have shaped and enhanced pandemic responses.

In the first article of the issue, Sagan and colleagues look at how resilience is defined for health systems and the strategies European countries have taken to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. Looking ahead to potential future health shocks, the authors draw lessons to help improve preparedness and strengthen health system resilience more generally. Rajan et al., next explore the critical issue of health democracy and the importance of having citizens and health workers involved in decision-making, especially in times of crisis.

Several transformations have occurred in the delivery of health. Webb and co-authors analyse how health systems have adjusted their coverage, care pathways and primary care provision to ensure the continuation of care. The transformation of health services could only occur through changes to the workforce. Williams et al. look first at how countries have surged and re-purposed the health workforce, followed by illustrating the range of measures taken to protect and support health workers.

The increase in digital health tools has been an obvious transformation which has necessitated changes to regulation, reimbursement, investment and training. These processes are explored in the article by Williams and colleagues. Care backlogs and waiting lists are now a growing concern in all Member States; van Ginneken et al. offer strategies on how to tackle these to help patients receive the care they need.

During peaks of the pandemic, patients who required critical care were mostly looked after in their own country, but Winklemann et al., show that cooperation across countries provided support when it was needed. The European Union has played a significant role in providing a variety of support tools for countries, facilitating the movement of patients across borders (see article by Wismar and colleagues). Mauer et al., further highlight that the European Commission has devised new instruments to expand the scope of existing tools for the pandemic response and beyond.

This special issue of Eurohealth is published at a time when COVID-19 variants and vaccine hesitancy present continued challenges. This underscores the importance of examining and learning which actions can contribute to strengthening ongoing health system responses. Acting on this evidence can ensure COVID-19 is a catalyst for transformative change in health systems to ensure they are better equipped to meet future health crises and to provide more accessible and higher quality care to European citizens.

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