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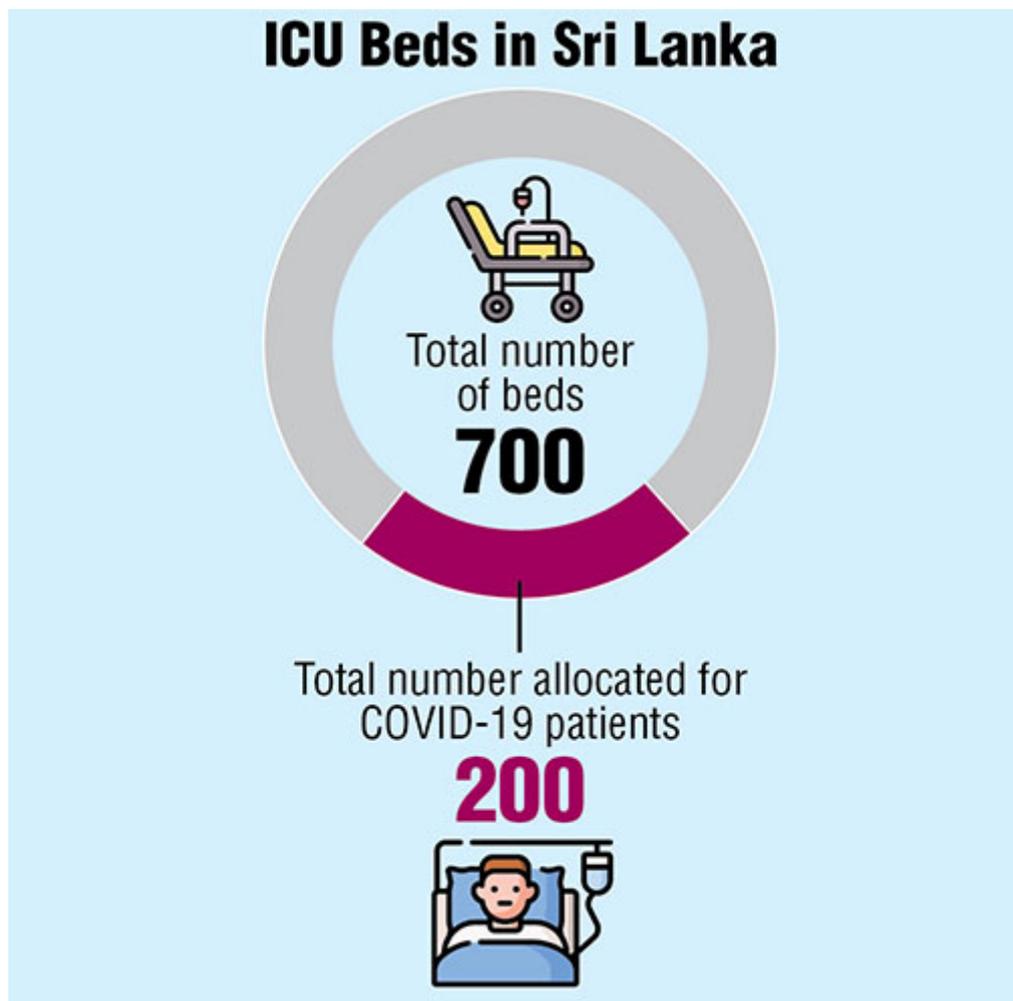


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BUSINESS

Bridging the Gaps: The COVID-19 Sri Lanka's healthcare response

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By Priyanka Jayawardena



Like many other countries, Sri Lanka faces numerous challenges in the battle against COVID-19. The pandemic has caused deep uncertainty and presented a colossal challenge to the country's healthcare system. With the rapid increase in cases and the emergence of new variants, Sri Lanka began to face shortages of medical resources, including hospitals, medical equipment.

The vaccination programme was beset with a host of problems from the start, starting early on due to the irregular and inconsistent supply of vaccines, poor and disorganised deployment and deviation from the scientifically agreed prioritisation. There was also alleged misreporting of COVID-19 daily statistics in the Gampaha district and Western Province. The absence of real-time data acted as a hindrance to obtain a reliable risk assessment in the country. Against this backdrop, this blog examines the gaps in the ongoing COVID-19 control programme and outlines ways to bridge these gaps so that more lives could be saved from COVID-19.

COVID-19 Vaccination Programme



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By mid-August 2021, more than 12 million Sri Lankans (approximately 25% of the population) had been vaccinated with at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. Other than the delayed supply of vaccines, there were several challenges related to getting approval for vaccine use and the vaccine prioritisation process. Moreover, many people were seen queuing up at vaccination centres aggravating health risks due to the lack of a properly planned system for vaccine deployment. The introduction of an online appointment system. More recently, the government has taken several measures to improve the rollout, including expediting the procurement process and improving vaccine administration with the support of the defence services.

Gaps in Pandemic Control

Sri Lanka's rate of COVID-19 screening has remained inadequate to prevent the spread of the virus. Systematic surveillance is crucial for the rapid identification and detection of COVID-19 cases. With newer variants found to be more transmissible and deadlier, there is a need to identify mutants and track the nature of transmission. Currently, the University of Kelaniya is conducting research on the nature of transmission.

Jayewardenepura is the only institution equipped with laboratory facilities to conduct genomic sequencing to identify new variants.

Countries like Singapore, New Zealand and Australia systematically monitor the pathogen through extensive testing and contact tracing. These countries are conducting 10-20 more tests than other countries with a similar number of new confirmed cases. Sri Lanka's extent of testing relative to the scale of the outbreak (positive rate was around 10% compared with Thailand and Malaysia but lower than India, Vietnam and Cambodia where the positive rate is below 5%.

Further, a major challenge to the existing healthcare system is inadequate ICU beds, ventilators, oxygen supplies and other necessities required to care for patients with respiratory failure. The availability of ICU capacity plays a crucial role in critical care. A constant and uninterrupted availability of oxygen supplied beds is needed to avert a crisis. Currently, less than 200 ICU beds are in isolation units for patients with severe COVID-19 symptoms, whereas just around 700 ICU beds are available in the hospital system across the country.

Equally, it is vital to have timely access to real-time data so that meaningful insights can be drawn but due to capacity constraints and administrative issues, PCR test results are often to be delayed. In some districts, the delays are said to be longer than one week. The slow process of generating test results are a grave concern and represent a major obstacle in the COVID-19 control process. There is a growing need for immediate and accessible healthcare services and healthcare resources to effectively respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Sri Lanka's health information systems are weak and under-funded and the lack of an integrated central health database and IT infrastructure has hampered digital health services.

Towards a Stronger Healthcare Response

The healthcare system has to be streamlined to ensure a successful vaccination drive and a smooth inoculation programme with online appointments including over-the-counter appointment facilities. Parallel to an efficient vaccination programme, an enhanced testing capacity is needed for the rapid identification of COVID-19 cases. Sri Lanka's current COVID-19 screening capacity remains low; therefore, expanding testing and increasing the public sector's capacity to identify new mutants is vital to curb the pandemic. Random PCR testing too must be carried out in densely populated areas which are prone to be contagious, taking additional precautionary measures.

There is a growing concern about the availability of medical supplies in emergency situations. Sri Lanka has to effectively leverage its limited resources in response to the pandemic.

crisis response has seen local innovation in the manufacturing of ICU beds and lab consumables and there is further scope to encourage local enterprise and innovation for a similar purpose. For instance, a team of Sri Lankan scientists recently invented a new PCR test using NANO technology, which is said to drastically reduce the testing time from 45 minutes to half an hour. There is now an opportunity to encourage local innovation and local manufacturing through such efforts, where they contribute to efficiency gains.

Furthermore, a robust laboratory strategy, which includes laboratory networking, communicating real-time information on COVID-19, quality assurance and adequate workforce capacity is important for rapid detection and case management. South Korea, for example, practised the disclosure of real-time information on COVID-19 by the government via dedicated websites, mass media, phone messages and mobile apps. Digitalisation of healthcare and effective use of technology for sharing real-time data, contact tracing, surveillance and coordinating the efficient use of clinical resources are vital for successful pandemic control. It is also necessary to improve systems to manage real-time data and decision-support systems. Improved functional integration and coordination in treatment centres and laboratory services bring in many benefits.

*This blog is based on the comprehensive chapter on “Coping with Pandemics: Sri Lanka's Healthcare System” in IPS' forthcoming ‘Sri Lanka: State of the Economy 2021’ report.

Link to original blog: <https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2021/09/02/bridging-the-covid-19-crisis-and-sri-lankas-healthcare-response/>

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