COVID-19 THERAPEUTICS ACCESS AND USE IN SUSTAINABLE RESPONSE IN THE PACIFIC ISLAND COUNTRIES & TERRITORIES

Together with COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics can play an important role in the sustainable, long-term management of COVID-19, preventing progression to severe and critical forms of the disease and reducing number of deaths from severe cases in the Pacific Island Countries and Territories (PICTs).

Since the beginning of 2022, the World Health Organization (WHO) and other development partners have been supporting PICTs in accessing and preparing to introduce novel therapeutics aligned to the WHO living Guideline: Therapeutics and COVID-19. Although access to novel COVID-19 therapeutics is still restricted in most PICTs due to limited supply and expensive prices, it is expected that the availability of therapeutics will increase in the last quarter of 2022 and across 2023.

To ensure sustainable access and adequate use of safe, efficacious, and quality-assured COVID-19 treatments in adequate amounts for PICTs, significant effort must focus on health system readiness, including defining clinical care pathways and training healthcare professionals. Simultaneously, there is a need for regulatory systems strengthening that can improve registration, safety monitoring and post-marketing surveillance activities, as well as procurement and supply chain, not only for COVID-19 but also to prepare PICTs for future Public Health Emergencies.

1. BACKGROUND

In addition to oxygen and corticosteroids as the basis of treatment for severe and critical patients, novel therapeutic agents such as Molnupiravir or Nirmatrelvir have shown efficacy in reducing hospitalization rates in non-severe patients at higher risk of severity.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic WHO, together with partners coordinated through the Joint Incident Management Team (JIMT), has provided support in the access to vaccines and more recently, to novel COVID-19 therapeutics in the PICTs through the ACT-A partnership

Although some USAPIs got access to novel treatments since early 2022, most PICTs still face difficulties in accessing and delivering therapeutics for COVID-19 to their populations. Despite the limited supply, WHO has supported access through the ACT-A partnership, a mechanism set up by WHO and partners to ensure fair and equitable access to novel therapeutics based on the recommendations of the WHO living Guideline: Therapeutics and COVID-19.

PICTs have shown interest in accessing these novel treatments, and have made a great effort to prepare for their introduction by adapting clinical care pathways, training health care professionals on their administration and ensuring rational drug use, despite current limitations in supply and regulatory functions.

2. PROGRESS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

2.1 Access and availability to novel COVID-19 therapeutics: Since the beginning of 2022, and by the end of July 2022, WHO has facilitated access to more than 1,000 vials of Tocilizumab to treat more than 500 severe and critical patients in 11 PICTs through the ACT-A partnership. In addition, more than 4,000 courses of oral antivirals for treating high-risk patients with COVID-19 (i.e. Molnupiravir and Nirmatrelvir/ritonavir) will be soon available via the ACT-A partnership.

Access to therapeutics is very limited at present because these are only available as innovator products whose supply is restricted to countries that have signed access licenses with manufacturers, and because they also have very high prices, usually requiring additional funding support. With the approval of new generics by Q4 2022 and early 2023, it is expected that supply will increase, and prices decrease in parallel, making it easier for PICTs to have access to COVID-19 therapeutics.

2.2 Introduction of novel therapeutics in clinical care pathways, update of clinical guidelines and providing technical guidance: WHO has worked together with development partners and countries to support timely update of clinical guidelines that contemplate the administration of novel treatments, including the development of assessment tools for prioritization of patients. The support has also included specific technical guidance adapted to the Pacific context (i.e. use of Tocilizumab in patients with *Strongyloides*) and provided educational materials for healthcare professionals and general communication materials to the public.

2.3 Training of Healthcare Professionals: Several ad-hoc trainings and discussion sessions have been developed to suit the needs of countries in the contextualization and set up of COVID-19 testing and treat centres, distribution of therapeutics at health facility levels, screening tools, clinical considerations in the administration, etc.

In collaboration with SPC and the clinical management pillar, WHO organised a 3-day webinar series in June about the introduction and use of novel COVID-19 therapeutics for decision-makers, clinicians, nurses, and pharmacists in the PICTs. More webinars will be presented in the following weeks with a focus on considerations for administration and safety monitoring, among others.

2.4 Regulatory authorization and approvals: Despite the absence of formal marketing authorization procedures in the PICTs, WHO has supported countries in the preparation of evidence summaries of novel therapeutics required for regulatory approval to be submitted to National Therapeutics and Drug Committees in several PICTs before being imported and introduced in countries.

2.5 Safety monitoring and post-marketing surveillance: Due to the novelty of COVID-19 treatments, and limited safety data from clinical trials, it's essential to monitor potential adverse events from COVID-19 treatments. PICTs made a great effort and significatively advanced tracking of adverse events following immunization (AEFIs) related to COVID-19 vaccines. Similarly, PICTs have shown interest in monitoring the safety and quality of different COVID-19 therapeutics and the creation of reporting mechanisms and databases for monitoring and response to adverse events (ADRs) related to administration of COVID-19 treatments and investigation of serious ADRs.

3. CHALLENGES

3.1 Difficulties in access and delays in procurement of novel COVID-19 therapeutics due to limited supply, very high price for products and freight, and lack of licenses and manufacturers'

agreements for some PICTs. Excluding USAPIs, most of the PICTs only got access to COVID-19 therapeutics through ACT-A partnership and limited bilateral donations.

3.2 Limited access to dedicated funding to cover access to high-cost treatments in the short and medium term. A reduction in prices is expected with the expansion of manufacturing capacity and prequalification of generic manufacturers, facilitating uptake in the access and use of therapeutics in the PICTs.

3.2 Limited capacity of safety monitoring systems at country level can make the tracking of adverse events difficult, which is of special importance in the case of novel agents, with limited safety data from clinical trials and on their use in Pacific populations. Also, there are limited post-marketing surveillance systems that can track the quality and identify the products that will be available in countries, making PICTs more vulnerable to the entrance of substandard and falsified COVID-19 therapeutics.

3.3 Difficulties in updating clinical guidelines, setting up administration centres and reduced trained healthcare professionals can challenge proper administration of COVID-19 therapeutics.

4. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

4.1 Recommendations for governments:

1. Facilitate capacity-building, training, and short and long-term development of human resources in clinical and pharmacy practices involved in the access and administration of COVID-19 therapeutics.
2. Advocate for strengthening of regulatory and supply systems for medicines and other health products at national and subregional level to facilitate access, regulatory approvals and reinforce safety and post-marketing surveillance systems.
3. PICTs are invited to make use of cooperation initiatives such as the subregional platform for regulation of medical products as an implementation of the commitment made during the 13th PHMM.

4.2 Recommendations for development partners:

1. Continue working in collaboration and build partnerships to facilitate sustainable access, rational use and safety monitoring of novel treatments and provide clinical and technical support adapted to the Pacific context.

2. Support regulatory and supply systems strengthening at national and subregional level and contributing to the subregional platform for regulation of medical products with the development of a roadmap for operationalization of regulatory support.