



Pandemic management by the health authorities in the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic

Performance audit

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What we audited and why

We audited the health authorities' management of COVID-19 during 2020 and addressed some of the management developments in 2021. The audit covered the Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection ("Ministry of Health"), the provinces of Carinthia and Lower Austria, and the city of Vienna.

The audit objective was to assess, firstly, the proper functioning of public health structures and, secondly, whether the necessary criteria had been met for successful cooperation among health authorities on the operational aspects of pandemic management, such as an up-to-date pandemic plan, effective coordination and communication and clear rules for enforcement.

What we found

Both the Epidemics Act and the national pandemic plan, which formed the basis for the government's response to the crisis, were outdated when the COVID-19 pandemic struck and so were unfit for purpose. The national pandemic plan contained no fixed operational procedures as a common basis for public health action in the event of a crisis. Such a mechanism would have guaranteed cooperation and the sharing of information among all key stakeholders (health authorities, health insurance bodies and hospitals), meaning the best possible use of resources to manage the pandemic.

The Federal Government had not put in place the necessary organisational structures or provided for basic staffing to meet the challenges of a pandemic. As a result, the functioning of public health institutions across the country was compromised during the early months of COVID-19. The Ministry of Health is responsible for steering, supervising and coordinating the pandemic management operations of the country's health authorities. However, it was often unclear to federal and regional authorities which of them was responsible for what, including the decision taking and implementation.





What we concluded

To meet the challenges of crisis management in the event of a pandemic, we recommended:

- to have clear rules for coordinated action at national level, for example through a crisis mechanism with clear procedures and responsibilities; this is to be achieved by updating the Epidemics Act, agreeing a new national pandemic plan and adopting regulations, decrees and instructions for enforcement;
- a better coordination among the various public bodies, i.e. enhanced cooperation and information-sharing involving all stakeholders (health authorities, health insurance bodies and hospitals), combined at national level with harmonisation of the work of crisis units, a crisis communication plan and effective integration of the regions into the system for epidemiological reporting and the accompanying arrangements for monitoring; and
- with regard to the functioning of administrative structures, continuity in key functions, the availability of public employees as and when they are needed to deal with a crisis, and measures to make employment in the public health service more attractive.