



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Ministry of Health

OFFICE OF THE MINISTER OF HEALTH

#63 Park Street, Port of Spain 100607

He: 3/16/178 Vol. I

June 21, 2023

The Honourable Bridgid Mary Annisette-George, MP
Speaker of the House
Speaker's Chambers
Office of the Parliament
Parliamentary Complex
The Red House
St. Vincent Street
Port of Spain

Dear Madam Speaker

The Tenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an Examination into the Findings of the Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the Factors Contributing to Clinical Outcomes of COVID-19 Patients in Trinidad and Tobago

Your letter referenced Parl.: 5/6/24 dated April 24, 2023 on the captioned subject is relevant.

Please find enclosed this Ministry's written response to the findings and recommendations of the Tenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee on an examination into the findings of the Report of the Committee appointed to investigate the factors contributing to clinical outcomes of COVID-19 patients in Trinidad and Tobago.

Sincerely

Terrence Deyalsingh
Minister



1(868) 623-2741



1(868) 627-2139



www.health.gov.tt



terrence.deyalsingh@health.gov.tt

Ministry of Health

An Examination into the Findings of the Report of the Committee Appointed to Investigate the factors Contributing to Clinical Outcomes of COVID-19 Patients in Trinidad and Tobago

Request for Written Response by the Ministry of Health

1. Staffing Challenges

Recommendations: (pgs. 11 & 12)

- i. The MOH should review trends in staff turnover, setting out an action plan addressing the shortage of personnel over the medium term into FY 2023 and submit this plan to Parliament by May 31, 2023;

Response:

The Ministry of Health's direct impact on retention and staff turnover reduction

The Ministry of Health and the Regional Health Authorities, in their strategic planning, focus on the development of human resources for health when designing and implementing policies.

The Ministry of Health receives support through its collaboration with international agencies such as IDB, PAHO and CARPHA for training and development initiatives. This supports the alleviation of staff shortages and improves employee retention. Some of the recent initiatives undertaken by the Ministry to address staff turnover and shortages include:

- Provision of scholarships to RHA employees for the development of skills in critical areas where both current and projected labour shortages exist. For example, the Ministry of Health, through funding accessed via the IDB loan, was able to train ninety-nine (99) nurses within the health sector in the specialization of Health Visiting. This developmental opportunity assisted the RHAs in alleviating a District Health Visitor (DHV) shortage and also boosted staff morale. As at May 31, 2023, sixty-eight (68) nurses were promoted to the position of District Health Visitor (DHV);
- CARPHA training - over sixty (60) employees from the RHAs and the County Medical Offices of Health were trained in the area of field epidemiology and surveillance to mitigate against current health care challenges and plan for future health care emergencies;
- Professional development opportunities through PAHO's virtual learning management system which is freely accessible to all healthcare staff;
- Study leave with pay for technical staff;
- Mentorship programmes for doctors;
- The retention of our healthcare professionals is of high priority hence continuous career and professional development, including training that facilitates the upward mobility of employees, is encouraged. Nurses are given the opportunity to specialize in areas such as

HIV/AIDs, Trauma and Oncology while doctors pursue specialization in areas of need including Gerontology, Oncology and Maxillofacial Services; and

- Suitably qualified medical specialists are sourced to assist with manpower shortages through intergovernmental arrangements.

The Regional Health Authorities (RHAs) retention, staff turnover reduction and employee wellness strategies

The Regional Health Authorities have implemented the following people centred practices to aid in improving staff retention and reducing staff turnover. Examples of such are listed below:

- Implementation of an Employee Portal - which facilitates the automation of HR Processes (work in progress);
- In-house Employee Assistance Programme (EAP);
- Quality Awards for employees;
- Establishment of an Employee Hub (work in progress) - employee common room, gym, day care, etc;
- Regular Internal Staff Training;
- Planned open house health promotion activities/life coaching activities;
- Beautification of Environment Drive;
- Sport and Family Days;
- Inclusivity of the Industrial Relations Unit to mediate in Staff Grievances;
- Exit Interviews (for Senior Staff);
- Some temporary staff hired during the pandemic were retained in existing vacancies in priority areas;
- There are annual activities that are staff led (Cricket competition, All Fours competition, Cookout etc.);
- Annual Staff Consultations - the executive management team visits with staff where they listen to their concerns/queries and addresses issues accordingly;
- Annual Interfaith Services; and
- Staff activities are held for international observances such as World Kidney Day, International Women's Day, etc.

The RHAs utilize the above activities and practices as a source of motivation for employee engagement. These initiatives are localized and specific to individual regional needs. The activities result in employees having higher levels of satisfaction, commitment and a reduction in staff turnover rates.

The Ministry has also established a Senior Joint Select Planning Committee with the University of the West Indies (UWI) through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to address academic and human resources matters in the health sector. This cross functional team consists

of healthcare experts, human resource professionals and technical staff from both the Ministry of Health, Regional Health Authorities, Ministry of Education and the UWI.

- ii. **The MOH should submit a status update to Parliament on the following by May 31, 2023:**
- a) **The support (technical or otherwise) provided to the RHAs for the implementation of the measures taken;**
 - b) **The metrics used to track the effectiveness of the measures adopted, and;**
 - c) **The evaluation of performance against these metrics**

Response:

For parts a) to c), the measures outlined in pages 10 of the report were implemented and tracked by the various Human Resource Departments of each RHA, such as:

- i. the regularization of short-term contracts into full contracts were completed across all RHAs;
 - ii. greater oversight in the filling of staffing shortages in critical clinical and administrative areas were completed;
 - iii. the continuous training of nursing personnel in ICU and IPC were conducted by the Ministry of Health with the RHAs; and
 - iv. the regularization of doctors for the operationalization of ICU services in Tobago.
- v. **The MOH should submit to Parliament by May 31, 2023, an update on the status of the ex-gratia payments to health sector workers in accordance with the commitment made by the Minister of Health in October 2022.**

Response:

The number of health workers in receipt of ex-gratia payments, per RHA, is as follows:

	NWRHA	ERHA	NCRHA	SWRHA	GRAND TOTAL
GRAND TOTAL	5,564	2,443	6,692	6,296	20,995

Source: *Regional Health Authorities*

2. Data Collection and Management

Recommendations: (pg. 14)

- i. The MOH should undertake a further assessment of the areas in which the data collected are in greatest need of improvement and indicate its further plans for the implementation of those improvements to Parliament by May 31, 2023;**

Response:

Currently, the Ministry of Health, in conjunction with the RHAs, is reviewing the data capture forms and the reports being generated to ensure accuracy and reliability of information. This streamlining of data and information should be completed by the 4th quarter of 2023.

- ii. The MOH should provide a roadmap for the implementation of the e-health information management system and its plan to address data and IT issues. This should include ongoing projects aimed at improving quality and data availability and the process of each project and be submitted to Parliament by May 31, 2023.**

Response:

The Ministry of Health obtained approval from Cabinet to introduce Electronic Health Records at the ERHA and at the San Fernando General Hospital. The Request for Proposal was drafted and is currently before the iGovTT, Ministry of Digital Transformation.

Further, the Ministry of Health commenced preparatory works for the HIS and the following activities have been completed thus far:

- i. a Gap Analysis among health facilities to provide an understanding of the RHAs' current systems architecture, data flows and reporting processes which proved to be a paper-based system transitioning to electronic health records; and**
- ii. the identification of key enabling areas required to support the implementation of the HIS including:**
 - the Information Governance Framework;**
 - the Patient Information Data Management System;**
 - the Business Continuity Plan; and**
 - the EHR Networking Plan.**

Once the eHealth strategy and system have been designed with approved resources, it is the intention of the MOH to have the system rolled out throughout the health ecosystem on a phased basis.

3. Challenges identified by the Tobago House of Assembly (THA)

Recommendations: (pg. 15)

- i. The MOH should report to Parliament on the measurable outcomes of pandemic-related initiatives undertaken to support Tobago, by May 31, 2023;**

Response:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Ministry of Health supported Tobago providing technical advice in setting up its COVID-19 response and in the provision of key initiatives including:

- i. facilitation of the initial treatment of COVID-19 patients at Caura Hospital;
 - ii. assistance and guidance in the use of COVID-19 protocols and guidelines;
 - iii. assistance and advice in setting up the Parallel Healthcare System in Tobago;
 - iv. provision of medical supplies and equipment, testing machines and kits;
 - v. training of staff in all aspects of COVID-19; and
 - vi. deployment of its Vaccination Programme with supplies and the use of guidelines and protocols.
-
- vii. The MOH should consult with the THA's Division of Health, Wellness and Social Protection and submit a status update on the results of efforts to address the challenges experienced in Tobago and lessons learnt during the pandemic with Monitoring and Evaluation in Tobago by May 31, 2023.**

Response:

The Ministry of Health continues to work with the Division of Health, Wellness and Social Protection, THA on various health initiatives and matters arising as it pertains to policy development, plans and health services delivery and provides where possible, technical advice, training and policy guidelines and standard operating procedures for the overall improvement of health services.

With regard to the COVID-19 pandemic and in addition to the measures outline in part (i) above, the Ministry of Health recognised the challenges experienced and assisted the THA with the following:

- i. the provision of Personal Protective Equipment, Ventilators, Ultrasound Scan Machines, IV pumps and Genexpert PCR test machines with supporting consumables;
- ii. the development and setting up of ICU Unit/s with equipment, staff and consumables;
- iii. the training of staff in the provision of ICU services and the updated use of the Infection, Prevention and Control guidelines;

- iv. the provision and use of mental health services with supporting training in the provision of mental health services for staff and patients including:
 - a. Mental Health Awareness;
 - b. Stress Management;
 - c. Mental Health in the Workplace;
 - d. Employee health and wellness;
 - e. Psychological First Aid;
 - f. Suicide Awareness;
 - g. Healthy Lifestyle/Healthy Me Healthy You;
 - h. Post Disaster Mental Health Public Education; and
 - i. Management of Loss and Bereavement.

Tobago was included as part of the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Technical Working Group (TWG) in the design, execution and coordination of a vast range of mental health and psychosocial support programmes during COVID-19 the pandemic inclusive of the effective utilization of EAP services and tele-mental and in-person mental health services for health workers, individuals and groups; and

- v. the use of the standardized tool for the reporting on the use of the COVID-19 vaccines on a daily basis.

4. Non-Communicable Disease (NCD) Management

Recommendations: (pg. 17)

- i. **The MOH should identify the measures undertaken, to date, to address the backlog regarding Chronic Disease Clinic appointments and the measures to deal with the “NCD Morbidity Debt” and submit to Parliament by May 31, 2023.**

Response:

Since 2022, the Ministry of Health has resumed all of its services at full capacity inclusive of Chronic Disease Clinic appointments. Several NCD measures have been implemented since 2022 and these include:

- a. the re-launch of the Trinidad and Tobago Moves initiative, a National NCD Risk Factor Reduction behavioural change communication campaign to address the increasing prevalence of NCDs in Trinidad and Tobago and in particular the associated risk factor behaviours;
- b. the expansion of the HEARTS programme to all health centres to significantly improve cardiovascular health by providing a set of practical step-by-step modules that

operationalise the chronic care module for an integrated approach to the management of NCDs;

- c. the implementation of the Gestational Diabetes Screening Programme to facilitate the screening and management of diabetes in pregnancy in Trinidad and Tobago through the following:
 - i. Preparation of public health sector labs for Tier 1 LQMS Accreditation;
 - ii. Provision of glucometers to health facilities and pregnant women with HiP;
 - iii. Linking of the Laboratory Information Systems with the SIP Plus;
 - iv. Behavioural Training for non-clinical staff who directly/indirectly interact with pregnant women, their babies and their families; and
 - v. Communications campaign for diabetes in pregnancy.
- d. the procurement and installation of physical activity equipment to thirteen (13) Youth facilities for community based Healthy Youth Wellness TT initiative;
- e. the procurement, delivery and installation of physical activity equipment to government and government assisted primary and secondary schools;
- f. the consultation and upscaling of the Diabetes Foot Prevention and Management of Infection Initiative and the subsequent roll out of services at various health facilities, eg. La Romain Health Centre, Sangre Enhanced Health Centre; and
- g. the development of the NCD Communication Strategy.

5. Implementation of recommendations made by the Appointed Committee

Recommendations: (pgs. 18 & 19)

- i. **The MOH should submit a report to Parliament by May 31, 2023 including the following:**
 - a) **The Ministry's plans to collaborate with other Ministries, Departments and Agencies to fully implement the recommendations made by the Appointed Committee;**
 - b) **An estimated timeline for its full implementation;**
 - c) **The lessons it has learnt during the pandemic to ensure the resilience of the health sector;**
 - d) **The mental support for measures implemented for staff in the NWRHA, ERHA and the TRHA;**
 - e) **The development of onsite recreational facilities for all RHAs: and**
 - f) **An update on the creation and implementation of a National Policy regarding ICU admissions for different age groups**

Response:

The Ministry of Health continues to collaborate with the RHAs and other Ministries in their respective work programme for the implementation of the Seemungal Report's recommendations.

For instance, the Mental Health Unit of the Ministry continues to work closely with the RHAs through the Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) Technical Working Group (TWG) in the design, execution and coordination of a vast range of mental health and psychosocial support programmes inclusive of the effective utilization of EAP services and tele-mental and in-person mental health services for health workers, individuals and groups.

As it pertains to the onsite recreational facilities, the RHAs indicated that several service options were utilised based on their assessment of creating an environment which fosters engagement of activities that promote healthier lifestyles and wellness for health workers.

Some of the key activities implemented include the use of gyms for physical activity, sporting events and the practice of eating healthier foods.

Further, the key lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure a resilient healthcare include:

- i. the need and importance of adequate plan and appropriately skilled staff in the management of the health emergencies;
 - ii. the importance of coordinating an effective Emergency Management Team in response to health emergencies;
 - iii. the importance of providing mental health services to stakeholders during health emergencies;
 - ii. continuous communication with stakeholders during the management of the health emergencies; and
 - iv. there is need for the development and continuous review (as needed) detailing the use of ambulance services during a public health emergency.
- v. **The MOH should report to Parliament by May 31, 2023 on whether any of the Appointed Committee’s recommendations will not be implemented including a brief description of the reasons for which each of these recommendations will not be implemented.**

Response:

All of the recommendations are being implemented.