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The impact of COVID-19 in the Long-term care system in Asturias (Spain)

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Corrections and comments are welcome at info@itccovid.org. This document was last updated on 14 June 2020 and may be subject to revision.

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Note: If you notice any inaccuracy in this report, please email aida.gonzalez@ucl.ac.uk

1. Key points

- The region of Asturias experienced a moderate rate of infections that put pressure on the healthcare system but did not overwhelm it.
- The Microbiology Department of the region's main hospital (HUCA) developed an in-house Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing system, which made possible to provide massive testing at a low cost.
- The majority of staff and care home residents in the region (31,580) had been tested for COVID-19 by 25th of May^{1,*}
- Community nurses were the main workforce deployed to strengthen the response of the affected care homes and lead their health and infection control protocols.
- PCR tests are periodically repeated on care workers (every 21-28 days).
- Care home staff in the region were offered free training on infection control, correct use of PPE and advice on how to keep up with official guideline updates. All care workers were offered this training regardless of whether they work in public or private institutions.
- 29% of care homes in the region had COVID-19 cases.
- 2/3 of deaths in the region corresponding to care home residents.
- 243 care home workers became infected (no deaths).
- 80% of the deaths of care home residents happened in hospitals.
- 42% of total COVID-19 deaths in the region were of people who had a diagnosis of dementia

2. Introduction

This document provides information on policy and practice measures adopted by the Principality of Asturias in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in care homes. The information contained in this report is from official sources such as the Health Observatory in Asturias², the

¹ Data provided by the Department of Health of Asturias

² [Health Observatory in Asturias](#)

regional Department of Social Care³, the COVID website of the Asturian government⁴ and media reports. Some data have been directly provided by the regional Department of Health.

This is a live document that will be updated and expanded as more information becomes available. In this first version, we aim to list some of the measures taken to mitigate the COVID-19 outbreak in Asturias. A future version will also seek to cover early evidence of the impact of those measures on people living or working in care homes.

Asturias is a one million inhabitants' region in northern Spain and one of the most aged regions in Europe - around 25% of its population is aged 65 or over. Like the other 16 autonomous regions in Spain, Asturias has a devolved government with almost full independence to manage its healthcare and long-term care systems.

3. Impact of COVID19 so far

The first confirmed COVID-19 case was identified in Asturias on 29th of February 2020. On 11th of March, the first COVID-19 related death was confirmed and on the 15th the first confirmed case in a care home was notified (although many suspected cases were already in isolation).

As of the 14th of June, there have been 331 COVID-19 deaths in Asturias⁵ and excess deaths of 379 compared to the previous year⁶. There are approximately 13,000 people living in long-term care facilities Asturias⁷. Like in many other regions in the world, a large share of the total deaths correspond to people living in care homes (224 out of 331, 67% of total deaths)⁸. The majority of people who lived in care homes and died of COVID-19, died in hospital (80%), compared with 20% who died in the care home⁹ (notice that many affected care homes were medicalised, this is hospital-like wards were set up and run by healthcare professionals from the public health system). 42% of total COVID-19 deaths in the region were of people with a diagnosis of dementia¹⁰.

On the 14th of June, 70 out of the 240 care homes in the region (29%) had registered COVID-19 cases¹¹. 5 of them still have COVID-19 cases while the rest are now clear from infection. The data below corresponds to the current situation of COVID-19 the long-term care system in

³ [Department of Social Care](#)

⁴ [COVID website of the Asturian government](#)

⁵ <https://coronavirus.asturias.es/>

⁶ https://elpais.com/sociedad/2020/05/27/actualidad/1590570927_371193.html

⁷ <https://obsaludasturias.com/obsa/wp-content/uploads/MORTALIDAD-CON-CORONAVIRUS-EN-ASTURIAS-260520203289-1.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.socialasturias.es/coronavirus/SituacionActual>

⁹ <https://www.socialasturias.es/coronavirus/SituacionActual>

¹⁰ <https://obsaludasturias.com/obsa/wp-content/uploads/MORTALIDAD-CON-CORONAVIRUS-EN-ASTURIAS-09062020-1-1.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.socialasturias.es/coronavirus/SituacionActual>

Asturias updated on 14th of June as it has been published on the website of the regional Department of Social Care.

Table 1. Current situation of COVID-19 in care homes for older people in Asturias – 6th June 2020. These are cumulative figures from 15th of March de 2020 (date of first COVID-19 case identified in a care home)

	Care homes	
	Affected	Active
TOTAL	70	5

	Residents				Care workers		
	Confirmed	Recovered	Deaths	Active	Confirmed	Recovered	Active
TOTAL	683	447	224	12	243	232	11

The evolution of daily COVID-19 cases in care homes, starting on the 15th of March when the first positive case in a care home was confirmed, is shown in the figure below.

Figure 1. Daily COVID-19 cases of infection in care homes, 15th March to 13th June.



Source: SocialAsturias

The evolution of daily COVID-19 related deaths in care homes, starting on the 15th of March when the first case in a care home was identified, is shown in the figure below.

Figure 2. Daily number of deaths in care homes in Asturias, 15th March to 13th June



Source: SocialAsturias

3.1. Timeline of the pandemic in the care homes system in Asturias

29th February – First COVID-19 case in the region.

9th March – Regional authorities inform care homes that visits should be restricted.

12th March – The regional government announces that visits to care home residents, are officially banned unless exceptional circumstances.¹²

14th March – Madrid central Government announces nation-wide lockdown.

15th March – First confirmed COVID+ case in a care home in Asturias (although some suspected cases had already been in isolation in the last few days).¹³

20th March – A plan of preventive mass testing in care homes starts after the first severe outbreak in one of them (70 residents infected).¹⁴

¹² <https://sedemovil.asturias.es/bopa/2020/03/13/2020-02687.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.lne.es/sociedad/2020/03/15/confirmado-primer-positivo-coronavirus-residencia/2612615.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.elcomercio.es/sociedad/coronavirus-asturias-pruebas-residencia-mayores-grado-20200320120402-nt.html>

25th March – COVID-19 guidelines for care homes get published by the regional Department of Health.¹⁵

7th April – the first data and report about the impact of the pandemic in Asturias is published in the website of the OBSA (Department of Health).¹⁶

9th April – the first data and report about the impact of COVID-19 in the care homes system is published by Socialasturias and Observass¹⁷.

14th April – 52 care homes were already under the control of the regional Department of Health (the infection control and management protocols, not the care home management).¹⁸

28th May – Current COVID-19 guidelines for care homes are issued.¹⁹

3.2. Policies and measures

As the rest of the regions in Spain, Asturias had no previous experience on managing similar infectious outbreaks and learned as the pandemic unfolded and more data and knowledge became available. This section summarizes key aspects of the approach followed to manage the pandemic in the care home system in Asturias.

3.2.1. Surveillance and Early Detection System (SisVAT-COVID19)

The SisVAT-COVID19²⁰ is a reporting and information system that connects in real-time every care home in the region with the Department of Social Care. This is the system used by care homes to report COVID-related daily data to the regional authorities. This flow of daily reports started on the 16th of March for public care homes (2 days after Spanish nationwide lockdown was announced) and on 22nd of March for private ones. This system has allowed local authorities to collect daily data from the 240 care homes in the region.

3.2.2. Regional Health System intervention in care homes

A week after the first outbreak in a care home was identified on the 15th of March, local health authorities decided to intervene and take control of the health and infection control management of all care homes that presented cases of COVID-19. For this purpose, several COVID -19 teams of healthcare professional from the SESPA (regional health system) were

¹⁵ <https://www.astursalud.es/en/noticias/-/noticias/procedimiento-de-actuacion-ante-sospechas-de-caso-de-infeccion-por-el-nuevo-coronavirus-2019-ncov-en-asturias>

¹⁶ <https://obsaludasturias.com/obsa/informacion-covid-19-en-asturias/>

¹⁷ <https://www.socialasturias.es/coronavirus/SituacionActual>

¹⁸ <https://www.lne.es/sociedad/2020/04/14/intervenidas-52-residencias-mayores-asturias/2624686.html>.

¹⁹ <https://www.astursalud.es/documents/31867/986714/Procedimiento+de+actuaci%C3%B3n+frente+al+COVID-19+en+residencias+de+personas+mayores+y+centros+sociosanitarios.pdf/a6c8e8e6-e967-1454-a0d9-aa21f752b3b2>

²⁰ <https://www.socialasturias.es/coronavirus/SituacionActual> (en nota metodológica)

designated to lead on this task. The majority of the members of these teams were nurses. On the 28th of March, 24 care homes were affected²¹ and, on 17th of April 54 care homes had been placed under the direct control of the Department of Health and allocated public healthcare workers to lead the infection prevention and control (IPC) protocols (not the management of the care home itself)²². By the beginning of June this number had gone up to more than 100²³.

Some care homes were medicalised (became similar to COVID wards in hospital) and nurses with special training in COVID-19 control deployed to support and train staff on IPC. For instance, in one of the first care homes affected (which reported the worst outbreak in the region, with 70 people infected), 17 nurses from the public health system were redeployed to strengthen the team.²⁴

3.2.3. Training for staff in care homes

As well as support and onsite training provided by the COVID-19 nurse teams designated in affected care homes, all members of staff working in care homes in the region were offered training on COVID-9 IPC and correct use of PPE. This training was provided for free by the regional public health system and delivered regularly. For instance, in the “Area IV”, a district health authority in the centre of the region, training sessions were offered daily, at 4 different times, to facilitate attendance by staff working on shifts. The training involved: correct hand hygiene, correct use of PPE, signposting to official sources of information and ongoing education and Q&A.²⁵

3.2.4. Quarantine centres

A large public therapeutic centre for people with neurological conditions, the Credine, was used as a quarantine centre and step down facility for care home residents.

3.2.5. Testing

A preventative mass testing plan started on 20th of March in care homes²⁶ after a severe outbreak was detected in one of them, 6 days after the nationwide lockdown was announced and 8 after visits of families to care homes were banned. PCR testing was prioritized for care

²¹ <https://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/asturias/2020/03/28/sanitariosasumen-asistencia-medica-24-residencias-asturianas-positivos/00031585394095638837510.htm>

²² <https://www.astursalud.es/en/noticias/-/noticias/salud-realizara-test-a-la-totalidad-de-residentes-y-profesionales-de-los-centros-de-mayores-para-reforzar-la-lucha-contr-el-coronavirus>

²³ https://www.65ymas.com/sociedad/dos-nuevos-brotes-sorprenden-asturias-menos-golpeadas-por-covid-19_15926_102.html

²⁴ <https://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/asturias/2020/03/20/era-medicaliza-residencia-grado-controlar-brote-coronavirus/00031584719691131621617.htm>

²⁵ <https://drive.google.com/file/d/11TYANCh-NvylmsTJvmVGgmf7NGkSAH4K/view>

²⁶ <https://www.elcomercio.es/sociedad/coronavirus-asturias-pruebas-residencia-mayores-grado-20200320120402-nt.html>

home staff as it quickly became apparent that when a virus entered a facility, it was carried by workers (family visits were officially banned since 12th March). Shortly after, mass testing of residents started. As of the 25th of May, 18,651 care home workers had been tested (11,051 PCR + 7,600 IgG (serological IgG antibody)), along with 12,929 residents (almost 100% of the residents of the long-term care system in the region – 7,296 PCR + 5,633 IgG)*.

Currently, PCRs are repeated every 21-28 days to care workers and many care homes have already gone through 2 waves of testing.²⁷

3.2.6. Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and care home staff

From the beginning of the pandemic, unions representing the care workers employed by the public network of care homes (ERA) (managed by the regional Department of Social Care) have been repeatedly raising their concerns²⁸ about lack of information, lack of PPE and absence of support for care workers with vulnerable relatives living in the same household, such as children and older people. A specific requirement from the unions was the provision of accommodation in hotel rooms²⁹ for care home workers to prevent the spread of the virus in their families. The regional association of private care home providers (Arga)³⁰ also asked for support from the regional government to deal with the imminent shortage of PPE in their facilities.

In mid-April, authorities from the Department of Social Care admitted that they were struggling to provide enough PPE supply to the care home sector³¹. Due to this general shortage, PPE was being rationed. The rationing followed a policy of giving priority to care homes with COVID positive cases and those that had been medicalised³². All health and infection control decisions in care homes were under the control of the Department of Health. On the 31st of March the regional government, in an official statement, confirmed that the regional Department of Health was providing PPE to all care homes in the region, both public and private.³³

²⁷ <https://www.astursalud.es/documents/31867/986714/Procedimiento+de+actuaci%C3%B3n+frente+al+COVID-19+en+residencias+de+personas+mayores+y+centros+sociosanitarios.pdf/a6c8e8e6-e967-1454-a0d9-aa21f752b3b2>

²⁸ <https://www.europapress.es/asturias/noticia-ccoo-denuncia-falta-informacion-proteccion-personal-era-20200317114633.html>

²⁹ <https://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/asturias/2020/03/27/sindicatos-era-denuncianoscurantismo-gestion-epidemia-residencias/00031585302282261204213.htm>

³⁰ <https://www.lavanguardia.com/local/asturias/20200320/474269414618/argas-pide-ayuda-a-la-administracion-ante-la-situacion-limite-que-se-encuentran-las-residencias.html>

³¹ <https://www.elcomercio.es/sociedad/coronavirus-asturias-residencias-proteccion-20200416150412-nt.html>

³² <https://www.lavozdeasturias.es/noticia/asturias/2020/03/31/coronavirus-extiende-geriatricos-privados/00031585672169576240789.htm>

³³ <http://movil.asturias.es/portal/site/webasturias/menuitem.6282925f26d862bcbc2b3510f2300030/?vgnnextoid=5593df008cf21710VgnVCM10000097030a0aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=d682d22a18b6e210VgnVCM1000002f030003RCD&i18n.http.lang=fr>

4. Vignette. Example of management of a new outbreak in the care home “Santa Teresa”

Santa Teresa is a 250 beds care home in the heart of the urban area of Oviedo. In late May an asymptomatic worker who tested positive in a PCR testing was identified among the staff³⁴. In the following hours, mass testing was performed on all staff and residents and 3 positive cases were confirmed (among residents). They were isolated in a space previously designated for this purpose (some care homes count now with this space as part of their COVID contingency plan) and all visits and walking within the facilities of the care home banned.

³⁴ <https://www.lne.es/asturias/2020/06/01/cuatro-nuevo-positivos-residencia-santa/2642621.html>