

# COVID-19: Healthcare Leaders Respond

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On March 21 and 22, 2020, Egon Zehnder convened 30 healthcare CEOs around the globe in a virtual meeting to discuss learnings and possible actions as the COVID-19 crisis accelerates worldwide. From the call, there is a clear call to action. We heard an urgency from these global healthcare leaders to collaborate and address some of the most pressing issues around the COVID-19 crisis, with a focus on not just their own employees but also on continuing to serve their patients and communities in need. We summarize below the most important takeaways:

## Act now

There is no time to waste! One CEO from an Italian-based company was clear: “Unless you isolate the people quickly and have effective testing, it is an uncontrollable situation.”

The response must be not just fast but comprehensive, such as when the Chinese government sent 30,000 doctors and nurses to Wuhan when the crisis became evident. Everyone agreed that it is time to act quickly and aggressively, especially around isolation and social distancing to stop the spread. European privacy laws were cited as a barrier to fast action by one CEO; in other words, how do you respect privacy but also ensure that people are not spreading the virus? All agreed that the industry cannot wait for the government to make a decision – it will be too late to optimize the impact of measures taken against COVID-19.

Here are some of the approaches that were shared on the call:

- One CEO from a large German-based company is diverting resources from R&D to COVID-19 testing for patients and manufacturing staff. He has found that “our plants have lower absenteeism than ever in the past. The solidarity and pride of our people is unprecedented, and we are helping the community as well as boosting morale inside the company!”

- A CEO of a European-based company shared they are ensuring that manufacturing continues for essential products through “extreme segregation between shifts and checking employees when they enter the factories.”
- A CEO from a China-based company spoke about shipping and supplying masks and other equipment to hospitals in urgent need.

## The consequences (or potential inconsequences) of testing

One CEO of a laboratory company in Europe shared his concern about the rise of home-based tests and the lack of understanding by the public. “Tests are a vital element of the strategy to fight things, no question,” he said. “However, the only way to identify the virus is through a laboratory test based upon PCR technology. We must not raise false hopes.” He later added, “South Korea did mass testing, but also immediately traced people through mobile phone and isolated them quickly. Testing alone doesn’t help you; it has to be consequential.” This view was confirmed by a CEO of a China-based company: “The Chinese government has publicly stated that at-home tests are not accurate and should not be used.”

## How to organize your response

Clear decisions need to be made on who in the company has accountability for the COVID-19 (global) response, and where the buck stops. It could be the CEO, a designated direct report, or a task force, with or without Board members. Daily meetings of the response team seem to work, one CEO shared. Either way, it is a group effort, but accountability is key to facilitate decision-making. Another CEO from a European company shared that all he has focused on in the last two weeks is COVID-19 – there is no real time to address the normal day-to-day issues. Therefore, the encouragement was to be explicit as to who is focusing on what. Things are changing so quickly, shared another CEO that decisions need to be made immediately. There is no time to manage stakeholders, build consensus and/or ensure the Board is involved in every key decision.

## Clinical trials

There was a lot of discussion around two aspects of clinical trials:

- How/should the industry deal with ongoing clinical trials (unrelated to COVID-19), shall they be continued? One European CEO raised this dilemma: “It is tough because there are a lack of patients at this point. And I don’t want to put our healthcare system fighting COVID-19 under additional stress. I also need to keep our patients safe. But there is no regulatory framework for how to deal with stopping a trial midstream. It is not as simple as lengthening the trial. What to do with patients who are in a trial but part way through and benefiting from

the therapy?” There are massive ethical implications on this one – are regulators aware? And is pharma in dialogue with them on this topic? Said one CEO: “We are going to get into medical rationing very, very quickly.”

- COVID-19 trials – one Asia-based CEO said he is aware of approximately 400 clinical trials right now, with the likelihood that at least one will get approved in China imminently; it will be a line extension of an existing product versus an NME. Gates and others have offered accelerator money for new products, but the way to access this funding and/or expertise is not clear (for example, there are no clear instructions on the website for how to become involved) which is delaying impact. Given the urgency, SOPs and traditional approaches must be reconsidered and disrupted; how are the regulators thinking about this, and what can pharma do to influence their views? One CEO from a US biotechnology company shared his concern: “I have spoken with both a large academic medical center and a community hospital in the last two days. They are looking to experiment with different therapeutic solutions for their patients and medical staff. Why are we waiting for just a few shots on goal – can’t we be more flexible on getting new therapeutics to market or thinking about cocktail approaches?”

## Maintaining the supply chain

Several CEOs expressed concern and frustration about how they will maintain the supply chain to their plants and out to patients. The issue is not only for life-saving medicines that patients rely upon, outside of COVID-19. It is also ensuring that manufacturing facilities have the right policies and procedures to prevent infection among their workers, getting these workers safely to and from plants now that several countries and regions have put up strict requirements about travel, and ensuring that there are enough masks, garments and other products to stem the rate of infection. “One of things I am struggling with; we now have several days of wait time for shipping in some geographies, and some shipping companies have raised their prices significantly.”

## Making use of digital technology to stay in touch with Healthcare Professionals (HCPs)

One of the CEOs in China shared that his company conducted more than 300 webinars or video calls involving more than 10,000 healthcare professionals. The company has also moved all of its scientific content online. They found the HCPs extremely receptive and appreciated the engagement especially during such challenging times. To that extent, is there opportunity to engage physicians digitally as they adapt to this new way of working?

## Keep up morale and provide trust to employees and the community around

One Italy-based CEO shared that they illuminated their headquarters building in the colors of the Italian national flag, and the positive response from employees and local citizens was overwhelming. Said another: “One of the things we are working on is building resilience in our organization. It is hard with all of us working from home.”

## Massive opportunity for immediate collaboration

The industry can do more by collaborating and learning from one another. In the view of the CEO participants, Governments are not collaborating as they could or should, but the private sector has a unique opportunity to do more. Right now, there is no forum to do so, in either Europe or the United States, and the largest companies (with a few exceptions) have not come to the table publicly with their intentions.

## Overall conclusion

The group on our calls is considering building a working team to address the spread, share leadership tips, find diagnostic and therapeutic solutions and mobilize the global healthcare community for a concerted effort. Many healthcare players have also been affected financially by the crisis. We will continue the dialogue in the days and weeks to come and share our collective learnings.

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