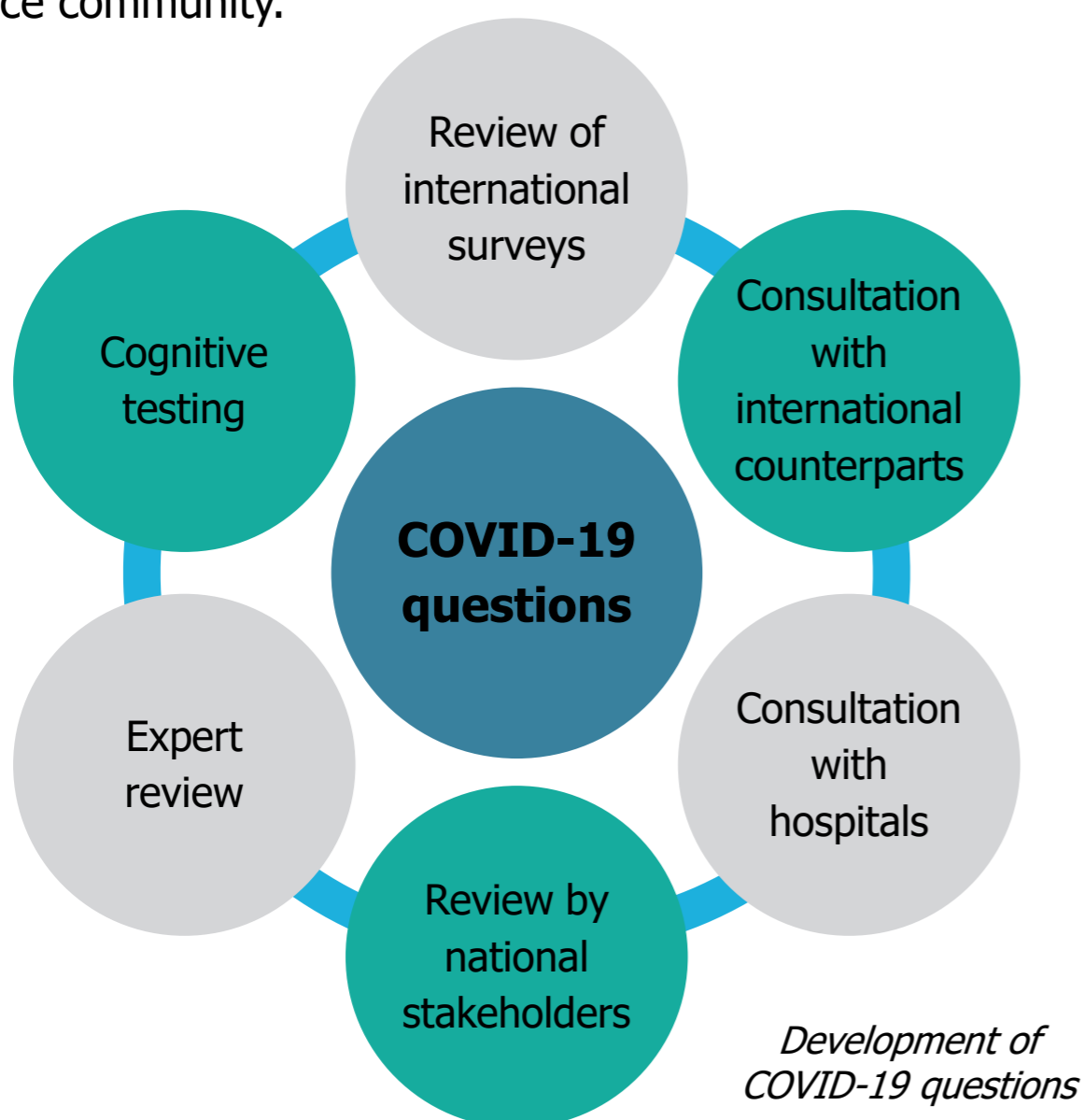


Background

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted healthcare services, including the cancellation of procedures and a move to virtual appointments. Patient experiences are central to the delivery of quality healthcare; therefore, it is important to understand how the pandemic has affected all aspects of patient care, including experiences in acute hospitals.⁽¹⁾ In Ireland, the National Inpatient Experience Survey was cancelled in 2020, as a result of concerns over the capacity of services to support the conduct of the survey and implement quality improvement plans in response to the findings. The National Inpatient Experience Survey will resume in 2021, presenting an important opportunity for patients to provide feedback on their experiences of care during the pandemic.

Methods

Internationally, the collection of patient experience data during COVID-19 has involved a variety of approaches, including continued routine surveying of patients using existing tools, COVID-19-specific experience surveys, and adapting existing tools to include additional questions. Adaptations of the National Inpatient Experience Survey (NIES) questionnaire were informed by a review of the literature and engagement with national stakeholders and the international patient experience community.



Adapting the survey

In 2021, a series of new questions will be included to address specific aspects of inpatient experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic that are not captured by the existing survey, such as staff communication whilst wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and contact with family and friends given visitor restrictions. Questions were adapted from surveys conducted in other jurisdictions,^(2,3) discussed with hospital staff and inspectors in Ireland and reviewed by national stakeholders and international experts. The new questions were then tested using cognitive interviews with patient representatives to ensure clarity and understanding.



Adapting the survey process

In order to reduce the workload for hospital staff associated with the operation of the survey, the methodology will be revised in 2021. This will include a reduction in the number of required contact dataset uploads by Patient Administration System (PAS) staff. In contrast to the extensive quality improvement plans that have been drawn up in response to previous rounds of the National Inpatient Experience Survey, hospitals will be expected to act on the top three areas for improvement identified by the NIES in 2021.





Challenges

While the collection of patient feedback during a pandemic presents a unique opportunity to understand the resilience of healthcare systems as they continue to operate under unprecedented pressures,⁽²⁾ this must be balanced with the capacity of healthcare providers to support surveys and act upon their findings. Given the considerable differences in the landscape of healthcare delivery in acute hospitals in 2021, as well as changes in survey methodology, any comparisons with survey findings from previous years must be undertaken with caution.

Implications

Patient experience is a strong indicator of healthcare quality and safety, and a useful tool for identifying areas that require improvement. In order to ensure quality healthcare throughout COVID-19 and beyond, it is important to continue to capture patient experience data. The 2021 National Inpatient Experience Survey will highlight how the pandemic may have impacted patient experiences, and will form the basis of future quality improvement plans at local and national levels. Findings may also inform the delivery of care during future pandemics and other national emergencies.

For updates, please visit <https://yourexperience.ie>

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