

## An overview of the Covid pandemic in Spain, and what Spanish health libraries have been doing to meet the challenges posed

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Covid, coronavirus, facemasks, lockdown, social distancing, hand gel, support bubbles... so many words that continue to resonate around the world today. For many, 2020/2021 will remain a period of hardship, sorrow, and lost time, but for others it will have brought opportunity!

Like so many countries, Spain has been hit hard by the pandemic. In Spring of 2020, Italy and Spain were among the hardest hit countries, and featured regularly on news reels around the world. In Spain, where the number of cases and deaths have been consistently high<sup>1</sup>, there have also been the serious knock-on effects of the virus. The Spanish economy has once again been hit hard, when it had only just turned the corner after 10 years of suffering the consequences of the world's financial crisis, one of the darkest points coming in 2013 when an unprecedented 27% unemployment rate was seen in a population of approximately 46 million<sup>2</sup>.

Spain is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy in Europe and 14<sup>th</sup> in the world<sup>3</sup>. More than 70% of its GDP comes from the services sector. With its Mediterranean climate, coastlines and islands, cuisine, and historical and cultural interests, in 2019 tourism brought in over \$90 billion in revenue<sup>4</sup>, with over 83 million tourists; in Europe, only France receives more per year. With the ongoing Covid crisis, the Spanish economy once again faces uncertain times, with the latest unemployment figures for March showing estimates of 4 million unemployed, many of those coming from tourism.

Back in May 2020 the European Union (EU), of which Spain is one of the 27 members, proposed an \$814 billion recovery fund to help its member states<sup>5</sup>. Just like the poor vaccine roll-out across the EU, the funds have still not filtered through to European member countries. The huge delays in the administration of vaccines in the EU has been the biggest news<sup>6</sup>. The EU will probably be able to ride the storm of criticism, and blame pharmaceutical companies like AstraZeneca, but ultimately it must take its

<sup>1</sup> John Hopkins <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

<sup>2</sup> BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-22290422>

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_GDP\\_\(nominal\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_GDP_(nominal))

<sup>4</sup> El País [https://english.elpais.com/economy\\_and\\_business/2021-01-04/the-spanish-tourist-sector-closes-its-worst-year-since-the-1970s.html](https://english.elpais.com/economy_and_business/2021-01-04/the-spanish-tourist-sector-closes-its-worst-year-since-the-1970s.html)

<sup>5</sup> MSN <https://www.msn.com/en-gb/money/other/eu-crisis-panicked-vdl-begs-states-to-unlock-covid19-recovery-fund-as-delays-hit-bloc/ar-BB1dW1nF>

<sup>6</sup> BBC News <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-56286235>

considerable share of the responsibility. Its lack of leadership has seen individual EU countries having to take control of the pandemic on their own, and the so-called harmonization which the Union was designed to provide has been seriously lacking. Many British pro-Brexit voters may feel vindicated in their decision to have left the Union.

### *How have Spanish residents met the challenges brought by the pandemic?*

During the first lockdown, the Spanish health system (as in many countries) was almost brought to its knees by the wave of patient admissions to ICUs. During one of the most severe and complete lockdowns in Europe<sup>7</sup>, Spanish residents embraced the Government measures to protect themselves, others, and the most vulnerable by staying in their homes. Nothing more personifies the attempt to contain the virus than the way Spaniards have taken to wearing the face mask. Since April 2020 they have been seen everywhere and it is rare to see people walking in the street in Spain without one.

While in lockdown, many initiatives to help ease Covid circled around on social media platforms. One initiative which saw massive participation in Spain and Italy were the daily "applauses". Residents across Spain would applaud from their balconies every evening in recognition of the efforts of health professionals and essential workers. This was an impressive display of solidarity at a time of great stress for those on the front line<sup>8</sup>.

Even scientists from the scientific community, previously unknown to the general population prior to Covid, became celebrities on our screens. A great example of this was Fernando Simón Soria, a Spanish epidemiologist serving as the Director of the Coordination Centre for Health Alerts and Emergencies of the Spanish Ministry of Health. His legendary jumper collection, hoarse voice, informal and frank approach when detailing the government's daily road map to tackling Covid endeared him to the Spanish population. His fame spread internationally, with even the New York Times highlighting his work<sup>9</sup>.

As of the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 2021, the incidence of coronavirus in Spain was one of the lowest in Europe with 60.8 cases per 100,000 population, compared to rates of 57.4 in UK; 216.2 in France; and 659 in the Czech Republic. It must be said though that while most residents follow government guidelines, it has been more difficult to convince younger age groups. Throughout the pandemic but particularly in recent months, the number of younger Spaniards organising clandestine parties with little or no health safety has been disconcerting to watch. It is surely not only a Spanish phenomenon, the number of lockdowns, the economic downturn and lack of employment opportunities have been the catalyst for some. By the time you have

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<sup>7</sup> We forum <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/three-of-the-worlds-hardest-hit-nations-are-preparing-to-end-their-lockdowns/>

<sup>8</sup> ITV News <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-03-15/coronavirus-europeans-react-to-life-on-lockdown-with-balcony-performances-and-applause-for-medics>

<sup>9</sup> Euronews <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XFo8Xl0xbGw>

read this, the 2021 Easter holiday break will have finished. Every time there have been bank holidays, summer holidays, Christmas and new year breaks, and now Easter, the incidence rate for Covid has spiked. Taking past experience into consideration, this is likely to repeat itself again after Easter<sup>10</sup>.

### *How have medical libraries in Spain coped during the pandemic?*

There is an article from May 2020 which I recommend you read. It was published in a Spanish open access journal for information professionals. Written by Domínguez-Aroca and the librarian group #AyudaBiblioteca, it is titled, "*Cooperation among health science library professionals in response to the Covid-19 pandemic*"<sup>11</sup>. Although it is in Spanish, it can be translated into English using any of the freely available online translator tools. In her article, the author details the fantastic collaboration between over 90 medical librarians from across Spain during the pandemic, how they rose to challenges posed by the mire of publications surrounding Covid, and how they were able to quickly disseminate the literature to health professionals on the front lines. I will say more about this librarian collaboration shortly.

In my 11 years with Wolters Kluwer as a trainer, I have worked with a great number of medical libraries across Spain and globally. In Spain, there has always been a strong collaboration between medical libraries, and a clear sign of this is the C17<sup>12</sup>, a collective online catalogue of health science publications, which 500 participating libraries can consult and through which medical professionals request articles and manage their petitions. With the arrival of Covid and particularly in the first national lockdown, a great number of health libraries had to close, as all available space, hospital personnel and resources were directed towards fighting Covid. There was a real fear that the library space would be used for other purposes and the paper collection would be lost, meaning serious implications for the library as a physical entity. Since those uncertain times, the situation has improved, with more people adjusting to the new norms of working from a home office and accessing content online.

Medical libraries such as the Hospital Universitario La Ribera in Alzira (Valencia) and Hospital de Dénia (Alicante), saw an explosion in online courses, webinars, training and meetings on numerous conferencing platforms such as Zoom, which before the pandemic was relatively unknown. As I said at the beginning of this article, even a pandemic provides opportunities!

During the pandemic, most publishers and scientific information providers offered access to content, and information related to COVID-19 from their respective

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<sup>10</sup> Statista <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1139048/coronavirus-case-rates-in-the-past-7-days-in-europe-by-country/>

<sup>11</sup> Domínguez-Aroca, María-Isabel <https://revista.profesionaldelainformacion.com/index.php/EPI/article/view/79338>

<sup>12</sup> C17 Online Catalog <https://v-hribera.c17.net/sf17/index.php/revistas/materias/action/viewSubject/materialpath/7-50502.cardiologia-50515/>

platforms and webpages<sup>13 14 15</sup>. The huge collection of resources and information made available provided a headache but also an opportunity and in Spain, librarians as information management specialists played an important role in ensuring the right kind of content reached their medical professionals in a concise and organized format.

So, as highlighted in the article by Domínguez-Aroca, in March 2020 more than 90 health science libraries throughout Spain (including hospitals, universities and health centers) got together to collate all the Covid information by specialist areas. Everything was done altruistically, even during hours outside of work. The aim was to provide a better response to the informational needs of health professionals and researchers related to the pandemic. The following page<sup>16</sup> was put together in record time by the librarians. The page has around 1,500 documents including articles, systematic reviews, guides, infographics on Covid and medical protocols. All materials are classified into the different clinical specialties: cardiology, dermatology, nursing etc<sup>17</sup>. The page was open to all health professionals who wanted to consult it. Individual libraries promoted this using social media platforms like Twitter, the hashtag #AyudaBiblioteca is a great example.

This team of librarians, represented by Alicia Fatima Gómez-Sánchez, was also recognized internationally for their initiative after participating in the congress poster session organized by the Koç University Library Turkey, in June 2020<sup>18 19</sup>. As of March 2021, with the de-escalation of the pandemic and the gradual return to normality, the page has stopped being updated. However, it remains to this day a testimony to the dedication, teamwork, energy, and professionalism of these librarians, who wanted to help protect lives by supporting their fellow health professionals on the front line.

The role of Spanish medical libraries also hit national TV channels. In the following video we see how the librarian and medical personnel at the "Hospital Universitario Severo Ochoa" in Madrid worked side by side to find the best evidence guidelines for the proper use of face masks and hand hygiene to prevent the spread of the virus<sup>20</sup>.

In the words of the librarian at the Hospital Universitario La Ribera, "It has been a difficult time, both professionally and personally, at first we did not know what to do. But the positives have been working as a team joining with the other librarians for the common good".

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<sup>13</sup> Cochrane Covid19 resources <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/covid-19>

<sup>14</sup> NIH Covid 19 resources <https://covid19.nih.gov/>

<sup>15</sup> Wolters Kluwer Lexicomp Covid 19 resources <https://go.wolterskluwer.com/lc-covid-19.html>

<sup>16</sup> Spanish Librarians Google Drive <https://sites.google.com/view/covid19-por-especialidades/p%C3%A1gina-principal>

<sup>17</sup> Enteral Feeding Pump, Hospital Universitario la Paz [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-\\_Elg4rsKwM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_Elg4rsKwM)

<sup>18</sup> Poster Session Koç University, Turkey <https://librarypostersession.ku.edu.tr/poster-ve-sunumlar/ayudabiblioteca/>

<sup>19</sup> Poster Session Top 3 posters <https://librarypostersession.ku.edu.tr/en/best-posters/>

<sup>20</sup> Medical Health Library TVE1 <https://youtu.be/20tmuF49Do> [use translate feature for English subtitles]

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