



GHA

German Health Alliance

The Importance of Assistive Technology during the Covid-19 Pandemic



Executive Summary

COVID-19 has highlighted the importance of assistive technology that enables and promotes inclusion and participation, especially of people with disabilities, older people, and people with non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and decreases the need for hospitalisation and associated acute care. Assistive technology is cost-effective and enables people to live healthy, productive, independent lives, and to participate in education and civic life.

Providing assistive technology as part of universal health coverage, including at the primary health care level, can reduce health system costs by improving health outcomes, preventing secondary health conditions, and reducing costs associated with caregivers and long-term care.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic poses major challenges for the assistive products industry, clinical rehabilitative service providers, and the people they serve. Vulnerable groups in particular, such as people with disabilities and/or limited mobility, and older people, lack access to adequate care and assistive products, and face becoming more dependent on healthcare workers, carers and family. To ensure access to comprehensive care in these challenging times, it is essential that:

- **Assistive Technology and rehabilitative services are included within the Universal Health Coverage framework**
- **Providers and manufacturers of medical devices such as assistive technology and clinical rehabilitative service providers are officially recognized as being systemically relevant**
- **Digital and Telemedicine solutions should be promoted and compensated as valid service delivery options and reimbursed through the use of uniform reimbursement systems**

Introduction

With an ageing population and an increase in the prevalence of NCDs, the number of people in need of assistive products globally is expected to double from one billion people today to more than two billion people by 2030. It is clear that action needs to be taken now. People also need assistive products as a result of trauma and traffic accidents.

Examples of assistive products include hearing aids, wheelchairs, spectacles, prostheses, and memory aids. These products support independence and well-being, can help to prevent or reduce the effects of secondary health conditions, and can also prevent comorbidities. They can also reduce the need for and impact on carers and mitigate the need for formal health and support services. Moreover, access to appropriate assistive products can have a tremendous impact on community development and economic growth.

Despite the global need for and recognized benefits of assistive products, access remains limited. Addressing this unmet need is essential for making progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and implementing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic poses major challenges for service providers, their employees and industrial manufacturers involved in the provision of medical devices such as assistive technology and of rehabilitative medical services. All are involved in providing medical care, healthcare products and medical devices for people in need in both acute and chronic settings. In particular, vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities and/or limited mobility require uninterrupted care provision.



Orthopaedic bracing and assistive mobility devices, for example, enable patients to be discharged from hospital more quickly after surgery and rehabilitation. The use of assistive devices can prevent or at least delay the need for surgery. Mobility aids support personal independence during the pandemic. This reduces the need for ongoing support services from caregivers which may increase the risk of infection. Providers of medical and assistive devices are therefore reducing the inpatient and outpatient care burden, thereby increasing capacity for COVID-19 patients.

The drastic measures taken by the EU and globally to slow the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus and to strengthen health care systems are correct in principle. But restricting the free movement of goods at a national level is not the solution. Free movement of goods, open borders and solidarity are essential for overcoming the COVID-19 crisis.

This policy paper calls on decision makers at EU and international level to strengthen the assistive products industry and, in particular, providers of assistive mobility devices during and after this period, thereby ensuring comprehensive supply now and in the future.

Ensuring comprehensive care

Medical device manufacturers and service providers are key pillars of outpatient care. By preventing hospitalization, by ensuring that hospitalized patients can be efficiently discharged, and in other ways they make a huge contribution to easing the inpatient care burden. However, to ensure appropriate outpatient care provision, all commercial providers must be able to participate in the market unimpeded, while complying with hygiene regulations. The systemic relevance of medical device manufacturers and service providers needs to be emphasized. To ensure that they are able to supply their products and deliver their services, it needs to be explicitly stated that medical device manufacturers and service providers are systemically relevant and therefore critical suppliers of products and services. It would also be helpful if regulations were to be harmonized both between German federal states and within the EU/ internationally.

- Providers and manufacturers of devices such as assistive technology and medical rehabilitative services are system-relevant outpatient care partners, and as such critical infrastructure components and should be included in the access to vaccination programmes. They must be covered by relevant exemptions and support measures as part of the integrated healthcare team. These measures should include safeguarding production, product supply, fitting and free movement of people, and supporting these key workers by ensuring that they have access to childcare.

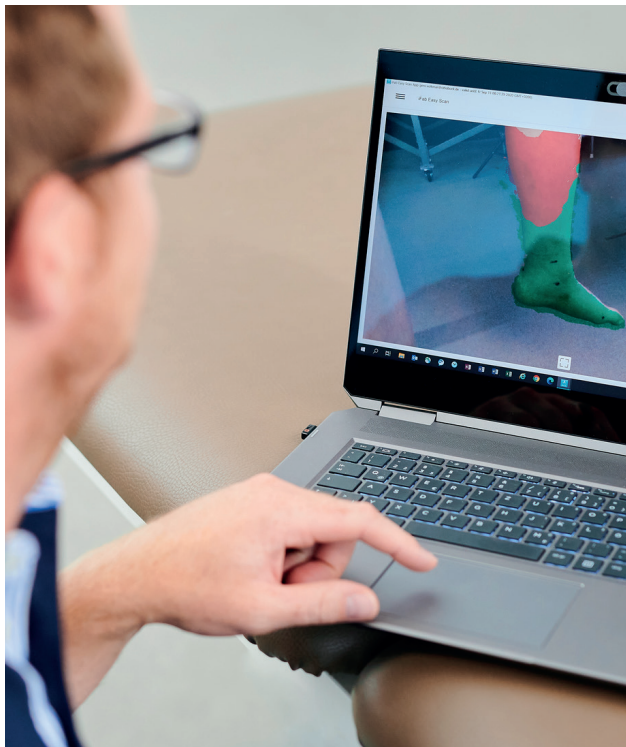


- To be able to provide care involving direct patient contact, health authorities must consider supplying service providers working with orthopaedic aids with personal protective equipment (PPE).
- Additional expenditure incurred as a result of COVID-19, for example procurement of PPE and sanitization of aids, must be reimbursed. One option, for example, would be to introduce a flat rate coronavirus supplement for which providers of medical aids can apply.
- Supplies of assistive products, other medical devices and personal protective equipment should not be requisitioned by governments, as this impairs the ability of providers to provide patients with assistive products in the community. This would have the consequence that shortages of assistive products could prevent some patients from being discharged from hospital.
- It is crucial that comprehensive care close to home continues to be provided now and in future in keeping with statutory requirements. To this end, there is a need for a financial safety net able to compensate people for loss of income due to COVID-19, and which does not involve excessive bureaucracy.
- Allowing people with disabilities to participate in decision-making processes has always been positive. The inclusion, integration and engagement of people with disabilities and older people is essential for addressing the problem of assistive aids. People with disabilities should therefore be involved in policymaking and planning.

Advancing Digital Health Solutions

Digital technologies are transforming the healthcare sector. Digital healthcare solutions offer multiple benefits. New technologies enable better, more efficient medical care, and broader access to medical expertise, especially in rural and remote areas.

- Promote telemedicine solutions. To enable assistive technology users to consult service providers, for example, service providers should be permitted to offer advice and consultation using telecommunications technology. The enormous increase in the use of telemedicine applications during the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated its added value. Digital coordination should be promoted between all actors in the care chain and should be recognized by national health insurance funds as the basis of care.



- In future, a consultation protocol personally signed by the patient should no longer be required when invoicing services. The additional implementation of video consultations by service providers enables a personal relationship with the patient to be established even without direct personal contact. This is highly beneficial to patient mental wellbeing. National Health insurances should explicitly mandate and reimburse the introduction and use of telemonitoring with consistent reimbursement of costs.
- Improving healthcare requires a system for the cross-border exchange of health data which meets privacy and data protection requirements. Appropriate, resilient data networks are essential for fully realising the innovative power of digital healthcare solutions. There is therefore an urgent need to put in place a data sharing framework and a coherent, innovation-oriented legal framework within the EU, worldwide and within Germany.





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