



COVID-19

A Review of the Impact of COVID-19 on Operations in the British Antarctic Territory

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Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt throughout the Antarctic medical community with lasting effect. The aim of this presentation will be to deliver a thematic analysis of the issues/events faced during the initial phases of the pandemic through to current management stratagems for those deploying to the British Antarctic Territory (BAT).

Screening for Deployment

Immediate changes were made to the process by which individuals were screened for deployment, based upon guidelines published by UK expert groups^{1,2}. Novel risk assessment systems suggested that patients with known respiratory conditions, immune suppression or had multiple co-morbidities were considered high risk for severe COVID-19. This screening was highly adopted during the period prior to COVID-19 vaccination³. Although there was no uplift in critical care capability, the introduction of oxygen concentrators and robust vaccination process did permit some relaxing of the screening criteria.

Isolation

Perhaps the greatest challenge for those deploying south was the period of isolation. Established as a full two-week firebreak quarantine to prevent spread of COVID-19 to the continent, the isolation period was successful in keeping the British Antarctic Territory free of COVID-19 during the initial season of the pandemic¹. Although successful in its aim, there is no doubt that the time spent in isolation was a significant psychological challenge, of which the lasting effects are still being reviewed.

Considerations for Evacuation

Despite best efforts, the very real threat of developing severe COVID-19 existed for the deploying population who left the UK during the initial waves of the pandemic. Although prevention of spread by respiratory droplets had been considered, airframes selected as capable of aeromedical evacuation were not modified to protect crew. The requirement for assistance with life saving intervention was also a challenge for risk to any bystander or immediate aid provider.

Lasting Impacts

Due to the potential impact of a severe COVID-19 outbreak, several rapid reviews of process have occurred. COVID-19 has driven a review of medical screening, vaccination requirements, isolation methods, contact screening, medical evacuation processes and the practice of how maritime assets interaction with stations. These reviews have enabled the refining of certain processes for the better whilst simultaneously identifying areas for improvement within our infection control processes.

Conclusions

Although most recent variants of COVID-19 have been less severe in terms of mortality, there remains a risk for a highly infectious variant to debilitate station activity or have significant impact on operational effect. The ability to instigate isolation processes and manage potentially highly infective patients should remain as a standing capability at all installations.

References

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