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Impact of COVID-19 and its variants on indigenous Brazilian children

The Brazilian natives have suffered heavily from the impacts caused by Covid-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. Until January 4, 2022, according to the SESAI epidemiological bulletin, 851 deaths were confirmed from different Special Indigenous Health Districts (Distritos Sanitários Especiais Indígenas - DSEIs) registered across the country (Brazil, 2022). The Ministry of Health expresses concern regarding the transmission of the virus to indigenous peoples and the impact that this infection is causing among traditional populations in Brazil, since the first confirmed cases. In the case of indigenous people, of Brazilian origin, they have different responses to new diseases, developing a higher curve concerning morbidity and lethality when compared to non-indigenous people (Agência Brasil, 2020). Although Covid-19 has been found to affect all age groups, epidemiological studies show that infant mortality in the general public is lower when compared to the number of deaths among adults since the beginning of the pandemic. In contrast, indigenous children have at least twice the risk of death from Covid-19 compared to other ethnic groups in Brazil (Brasil de Fato MG, 2021).

It is important to highlight that this fact is due to several issues, such as socioeconomic, as the indigenous population has a high level of poverty; educational, as the level of education is low; and demographic issues, as access to health services is distant and precarious (Oliveira et al., 2021). Also according to the aforementioned author, the comparative risk of deaths among indigenous children and adolescents associated with Covid-19 was analyzed. The study showed that, on a larger scale, the highest risk of death is in children aged zero to two years and adolescents aged twelve to nineteen-year-olds from the North and Northeast of Brazil, among the poor macro-regions of these localities. Therefore, the socioeconomic relationship and social vulnerability of the native peoples strongly influence their health conditions. The considerable increase in the number of cases and the great power of transmission evidenced potentially fatal manifestations related to coronavirus diseases in children, such as the Multisystem Inflammatory Syndrome (MIS-C), which is a relationship between Covid-19 and other infections, leading to problems in different organs of the body in many children in the Brazilian territory (PAHO, 2021a).

MIS-C is diagnosed by examining each system depending on the child’s complaint. These are biochemical tests performed in the laboratory and imaging. These services are not provided at the basic health units and, therefore, indigenous children are referred to the secondary care service. Due to the reality of extreme poverty, going in search of the service becomes practically unfeasible in communities, thus showing a sensitive disparity in the assistance service for indigenous children and children of other ethnicities (Campos et al., 2020). In September 2021 the Pan American Health Organization exposed a significant increase related to admissions and deaths of children for Covid-19. One of the factors associated with these statistics is the fact that children are not eligible for vaccination and are more likely to acquire and transmit the disease (PAHO, 2021b). According to Agência Brasil (2022), the Ministry of Health intends to include all children aged 5 to 11 in the National Immunization Plan urgently in the second half of January 2022. Amidst so many difficulties faced by indigenous children with the Covid-19 infection, the vaccine may improve the health conditions not only of the child, but also of the entire community where they are inserted. Regarding the omicron variant of Covid-19, it is observed that, in other countries, it has not yet been determined whether omicron causes less serious illnesses in children than other variants of Covid-19. However, it is noteworthy that the transmissibility is extremely high and it is a factor that can increase the number of hospitalizations proportionally. Bringing to the indigenous reality, being an isolated population, the risk of omicron infection can be low. Nevertheless, unvaccinated children must continue to follow the measures strictly to protect and combat Covid-19 (CNN Brasil, 2021).

The pandemic has brought to light several vulnerabilities that indigenous communities face, so when the question of new variants of Covid-19 is brought up, the entire Family Health Strategy (FHS) team must be present to carry out health education. Advising that doing the basics as recommended by the Ministry of Health can save the lives of many indigenous children, as well as guiding parents to vaccinate their children as soon as they have the opportunity (Milhorance, 2020). Finally, the Family Health Strategy -FHS must guarantee biopsychosocial well-being, the prevention of Covid-19 and its impacts, treating the indigenous community in a holistic perspective, also encompassing their cultural specificities, aiming to undertake effective and culturally competent care.

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Conflict of interests

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