

A EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE

THE BIOMEDICAL WORKFORCE IN THE PANDEMIC

Fernando Mendes, President of the European Association for Professions in Biomedical Science, on the essential role of biomedical scientists in healthcare systems.

Since February 2020, biomedical scientists have been living a unique moment at the workplace, in the laboratory and on a personal level.

The SARS-CoV-2 virus has affected the whole world, almost shutting down economies and services and has had a huge impact on all health services. We have been and will remain key players in COVID screening, diagnosis, and disease monitoring. Never has the attention on our profession been in such focus.

The work developing and verifying assays, then scaling up for population testing is a tribute to our members. The need for reliable and precise tests and results, which emerged at a dizzying speed, contributed distinctively to identifying positive cases and mitigating against SARS-CoV-2 transmission.

Rose to the challenge

We felt, as never as before, the demand for short turnaround time on results and

our profession rose to the challenge – we showed the level of knowledge, skills, and competencies we have, which are sometimes never seen, or, even worse, not given recognition by other professions.

All around Europe, biomedical scientists answered the call for action, working tirelessly and 24/7. We have never tested so many samples for an emerging disease as we are testing today and, with so different many tests – nucleic acid, antigen, and antibody. There is also the sequencing of variants. And where is all this performed? In our laboratories, by our colleagues.

On the other hand, due to a shortage



of biomedical scientists in some countries and the need for mass testing, we observed that researchers and other non-health professions at the beginning of the pandemic were also called on to perform tests. Unfortunately, in some countries this is still a reality to be fought. In other countries, due to the efforts of the professional associations and the need to ensure clinical diagnostic tests are performed by the authorised health professionals, rather than others who are allowed to work at the laboratory, those who have the right knowledge, skills and competencies, new rules and laws emerged, reaffirming that only the authorised professionals could perform the tests. In some countries it even went further, allowing biomedical scientists to act as laboratory directors, performing, interpreting, validating and issuing results under specific conditions, as seen in Portugal with the mass testing programme with higher education, in collaboration with the Portuguese Red Cross.

The EPBS

We are aware that we should test more and we need synergies that we can learn from. But this testing must be performed by those who can do it best – biomedical scientists. If our professional and personal life was and still is affected,

the work and ways of working of the European Association for Professions in Biomedical Science (EPBS) were also affected. This change was not only due to travel restrictions, but also to protect the Management Body and the EPBS members. Suddenly, all our appointments, meetings and congresses were suspended or cancelled. We moved all our “in person” meetings to virtual mode.

All our Management Body meetings since February 2020 have been virtual, shorter and more frequent and intense.

The General Governing Body, planned to be in Santiago de Compostela in November 2020, had to be virtual and the agenda adapted. The road map of EPBS suffered changes – some of our aims had to be postponed and we had to re-think our short-term aims and focus on the crucial tasks for EPBS and our members.

The aims of EPBS did not change, we adapted. As EPBS President, I found the experience exceptional, several decisions had to be made, all with the collaboration of the Management Body and based on the information we had at the moment. Times were not easy, but they revealed the power of teamwork, our focus on the profession and the importance of networking. The EPBS network allowed us to discuss science around SARS-CoV-2, share experiences and the dos and don'ts regarding COVID-19.

THE EPBS

Founded in 1999, the EPBS is a non-profit organisation dedicated to promoting best practice and ethics for biomedical laboratory scientists across Europe. For more information, visit epbs.net

Shaping the response

Even in virtual mode, the power of this EPBS network is fabulous. When a country was in a major crisis, the knowledge shared and the support given by European colleagues helped significantly in shaping their laboratory response.

Due to the uncertainty we are facing with COVID-19's evolution, the possibility of further waves, the vagueness regarding travelling authorisations and the different situations in every country, it is hard to estimate when we can return to the normal mode of working. Nevertheless, at EPBS there is a certainty – we all wish to keep working to maintain the level of professional recognition by the public. Our aims, namely, are to help and work with all EPBS members that wish to raise their level of education to the minimum acceptable

standard of education for biomedical scientists. This standard is a Bachelor level of 1st cycle (180–240 ECTS) including supervised clinical practice (European Qualification Framework level 6). Our policy is that the possibility to progress to higher-level degrees of Master's and PhD is an integral part of the education and training of biomedical scientists. Another aim is to review EPBS statutes, to prepare the organisation for the coming years and to approve European standards of proficiency for our profession. As a regulated profession in several countries and at the European level, we have an obligation to keep the ethos of our profession as well as to promote

continuous professional development as a key action to ensure the professional knowledge, skills and competencies are current. By doing this we are guaranteeing this profession has a bright future, but all this can only have meaning because you, as a biomedical scientist, every single day at your workplace, also emphasise the added value of our profession and our essential role in health care systems.

Finally, a couple of words to all biomedical scientists that were and still are on the frontline, working for the greater good of the patient, showcasing our profession to the world – thank you. 

