

The nuclear medicine sector, like everyone else, has faced and is still facing huge challenges during the coronavirus pandemic. NMEU's Transport Expert Group surveyed its members to find out how it has affected the transport of radioactive material, from shipment and safety to controls and audits.

How the COVID crisis has affected the transport of radiopharmaceuticals



Their responses shine a light on the crucial role of transporters as a link between the industry and the patient, including their experience dealing with customs and administrative procedures that are outside the scope of traditional medical practises. It shows that while operators were able to adjust to the extraordinary circumstances and find alternative routes where necessary with minimal impact or delays on shipments, there is a risk from future disruptions.

Gilles Degauque, Chairman of **NMEU's Transport Expert Working Group**, asked our members five general questions about how the coronavirus affected them:

- *How did the pandemic impact your day-to-day work?*
- *What was the response from local authorities regarding the transport of radiopharmaceuticals or radiochemicals? What sort of response were you hoping for?*
- *How do you see the next six months in the transport sector?*
- *Has this crisis made you reassess your relationship with transport companies?*
- *What lessons can you draw from this time and what opportunities do you see in the future?*

It appears that the main challenge was to deal with the sudden drop of flights availabilities due to the reduction of passenger flights.

The crisis also led to a dip in demand from hospital customers and other PET-CT sites, sometimes by up to half. It took months to revert to near normal. Transport by air was also affected, with deliveries also taking time to restore. "A big drop in volumes to manufacture and distribute but with same fixed costs," one member said. Another pointed out that it will not only affect this year's budgets but next year's as well.

However, since scanning for at-risk cancer patients is seen as a priority, even during the pandemic, deliveries were able to continue. *“Local road transportation could carry on as normal as an emergency service,”* another member said.

As the second wave of the pandemic sweeps across Europe, members have been bracing themselves for more interruptions, including a new set of containment measures. This would once again affect activities, but at least operators would be more prepared. *“Should a second-wave result in national lockdowns, the provision of local radiopharmaceuticals - including its transportive constituent - would still carry on but at a reduced capacity, just as at the start of the contagion,”* one member said. Another member predicted that a second wave would mean some radiotracers, like tracers used for clinical studies, would not become a priority, because patients will not go to hospitals.

As to whether this has made them re-evaluate their transport arrangements, members said it has underlined the value of connections. *“We have good relationships with our courier companies already. But their ability to provide a service would be affected should they suffer a shortfall in staffing, who for instance would have to self-isolate,”* said one member. It is also worth considering alternatives, just in case. *“It is important to have a back-up plan and do not have only one supplier,”* said another member.

The lesson from this episode – which is still ongoing, of course – is that the sector needs to work together with authorities to support the supply chain, whatever the circumstances.

Further disruptions could have serious consequences, and even destroy some of the players in the nuclear medicine sector. Clear and rapid communications are needed to ensure that logistic management provides flexible yet regular shipping. *“It is encouraging to see some authorities can still prioritize radiopharmaceuticals as necessary and life-saving. We hope that this view prevails,”* said one member. *“We have an opportunity to ensure that all authorities share this consensus.”*

