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## Letter From Argentina: Older People, Pensioners, and Care Homes On The Frontlines Against COVID-19

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### The initial cases:

The first recorded case of COVID-19 in Argentina was on 3 March 2020. A 43-year-old man who had recently been in Italy, Spain and Germany walked into a health insurance clinic in Buenos Aires when he developed symptoms. The patient is reported to have made a full recovery. The first death attributed to COVID-19 was recorded on 7 March 2020 when a 64-year-old man who had just visited France and had pre-existing health conditions succumbed to the virus.

Between 3rd March and 13th April, 2208 cases of COVID-19 have been reported. Of this 97 people died and 515 people who reportedly recovered. The average age of people known to have been infected is 45. The average age of people known to have died from COVID19 is 68.

A national lock-down was put in place on 20 March. Initially, this was due to end on 31 March, but it has since been extended to 13 April and, most recently, 26 April. As in many countries in Latin America, a significant share of the population live in shantytowns or other precarious settings, where high population density impedes physical distancing. The policy response has been to isolate these communities in their entirety--nobody is allowed to either enter or leave. At the same time, religious organisations have provided special dormitory shelters for older people living in these over-crowded shantytowns.

The quality of health services for older people in Argentina has been a subject of criticism for many years. In recent days, the website Change.org has started to transcribe and publish public complaints about the reduction of health treatment availability for frail, older people and those with other health conditions, as a result of the pandemic. Some local governments have developed emergency volunteer programmes to provide basic support for older people, such as help with buying essential food and medication.

### Pension chaos:

All older people in Argentina receive a pension from either a contributory or an assistance scheme. In theory, this should help to shield them against some of the indirect impacts of

the pandemic. Instead, a poorly thought-out intervention has exposed large numbers of pensioners to infection.

From late evening on 3rd April until the next morning, around one and a half million older people waited on pavements in long queues for banks to open, so they could collect their pension benefits. It was one of the coldest nights of the year. These banks had been closed since 20 March, to reduce infections and to protect the staff working there.

Almost all pensioners in Argentina habitually collect their pensions from banks, rather than using ATMs or other means. As such, many had been unable to access their pensions and were experiencing financial distress. It was announced on 3rd April that the banks would reopen for a few hours on the following day, specifically to process pension payments.

Understandably, many older people were concerned that not all pensions would be processed in this short window and so they were anxious not to be at the back of the queue. To date, the effects of this unfortunate incident on these older people, both in terms of COVID-19 infection and other forms of harm are not known.

#### **Nursing home and care homes on the frontline:**

Argentina contains a large number of nursing and care homes. The actual number is unknown, as many are unregistered and operate on the fringes of legality. An informed estimate would be at least 10,000 such establishments. In many cases, the quality of care is very poor and residents usually share rooms with several other people.

The first reported instance of the death of a nursing home resident was on 24th March in Buenos Aires city. The older woman in question had been visited by a relative who had recently been abroad. The city authorities transferred all 35 residents of this nursing home, as well as staff, to a hospital isolation unit. On 2nd April another nursing home was evacuated after having received a visit from a person who was infected and three residents had been tested positive. To date, there are no known additional cases of infection in nursing homes or care homes in Buenos Aires city.

On 12th April it was reported that 32 people, including 25 older people and 7 staff, had been infected with COVID-19 in a nursing home located in another part of Argentina in the rural district of Córdoba Province. The infection was traced to a family doctor who had treated residents and who went on to develop symptoms. A further 49 older people remain in the same nursing home, having been tested as negative.

On 13 April a care home in Moreno, an outlying neighbourhood of Buenos Aires city, was closed down by the local authorities following the deaths of two older residents. The number of residents of this care home who are now infected is not yet known. Following the first resident's death on 5th April, it was announced that the care home had been inspected and found not to be meeting local government care standards. Of the remaining residents, 15 were transferred to hospitals and 2 to their own families (who declared that they would remain in isolation). The local government later reported that this nursing home had admitted new residents after a national freeze on new admissions (and visits) had been announced. The infection was brought into the home by one of these newly admitted residents.

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