

ISH COMMITTEE, PARTNER AND AFFILIATED SOCIETY REPORTS

Health on the islands - hunting the silent killer – summer public health action of the Croatian Hypertension League

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The “Hunting the Silent Killer” initiative, organized by the Croatian League for Hypertension, is a public health campaign aimed at the early detection of elevated blood pressure (BP), i.e. hypertension and the identification of risk factors for cardio-kidney-neuro-metabolic diseases under the patronage of the Croatian Academy of Scientists and Art. The main objectives of the campaign are to raise public awareness of the importance of prevention, provide free and voluntary health screenings and examinations, and educate the population on healthy lifestyle habits that can reduce the risk of chronic non-communicable diseases. Through direct contact with citizens, the campaign seeks to promote individual responsibility for personal health, encourage regular BP monitoring, and foster the timely management of arterial hypertension and related risk factors. In the long term, the campaign aims to reduce the prevalence of hypertension in the population, improve the management of treated hypertensive patients, and strengthen a culture of preventive care within the community.

Hypertension in Croatia

Arterial hypertension represents a major public health issue in the Republic of Croatia. According to the EH-UH-1 study conducted in 2005, the prevalence of hypertension in the adult population was 37%, while preliminary data from the EH-UH-2 study in 2020 indicate an increase to over 50%.^{1,2} Alarmingly, nearly 50% of affected individuals are unaware of their condition, and a significant proportion of diagnosed patients neither receive appropriate pharmacological treatment nor modify their lifestyle.³ According to data from the Croatian Bureau of Statistics and the Croatian Institute of Public Health, hypertensive diseases were the second leading cause of death in the overall population in 2023 and the leading cause of death among women.⁴ These data underscore the appropriateness of the campaign’s name, as arterial hypertension, often asymptomatic, represents the true “silent killer No. 1,” ultimately leading to severe complications and mortality.

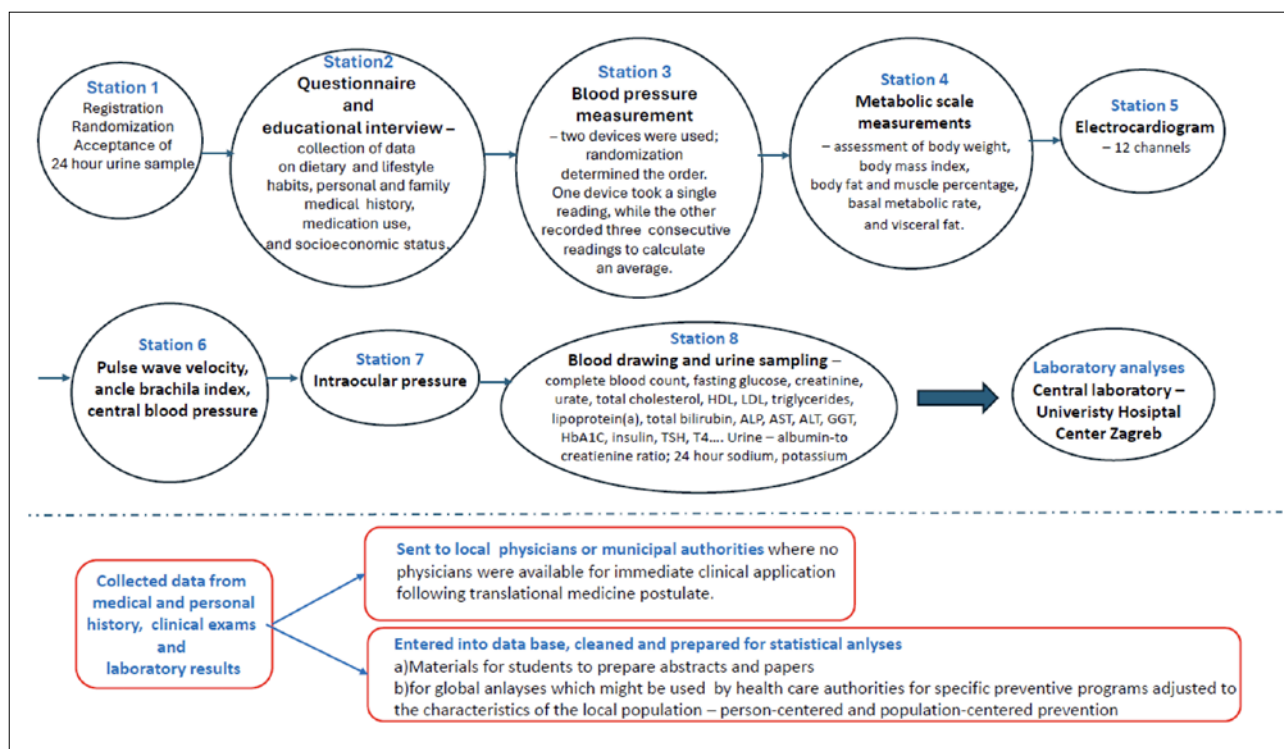


Figure 1. Flow-chart of the action Health on island – Hunting the Silent Killer

About the Campaign

The “Hunting the Silent Killer” campaign has been conducted in Croatia since 2019, with the special sub-initiative “Health on the Islands” implemented this year on Dugi Otok from August 25th to 29th. This part of the “Hunting the Silent Killer” campaign targets islands due to limited or insufficient access to healthcare.

Volunteers from the Croatian League for Hypertension symbolically “fought against demons” – risk factors contributing to the development of hypertension and other cardio-kidney-neuro-metabolic diseases. The most important seven demons included: the salt demon (excessive salt intake), the obesity demon, the physical inactivity demon, the smoking demon, the insufficient fruit and vegetable intake demon, the improper BP measurement demon, and the non-adherence and poor compliance demon.

Participants and Organization

The Dugi Otok campaign included 25 volunteers: 20 medical students from Croatian universities, one young doctor, one nurse, and three members from organizing team. The campaign provided significant

educational value for students, who developed practical skills in patient communication, BP measurement, ECG recording, metabolic analysis, pulse wave velocity (PWV) assessment, intraocular pressure measurement, and teamwork. For many, this was their first direct contact with individuals, outside healthcare institutions, an experience crucial for their professional development.

Students also participated in the research part of the campaign, which functioned as an opportunistic screening. Simultaneously, the campaign had a strong educational component for citizens, who received advice on healthy lifestyle habits, informational leaflets, and opportunities for individual counseling on the prevention of cardio-kidney-neuro-metabolic diseases.

Methodology

During the five-day campaign, nearly 300 voluntary citizens were examined. This represented nearly half of the initially intended amount, as the island experienced a significant number of COVID-19 cases during that period. Each participant passed through eight working stations that enabled a comprehensive assessment of cardio-kidney-metabolic health. (Figure 1)

Blood and urine samples were properly centrifuged, stored and transported to the central laboratory at the University Hospital Centre Zagreb to ensure comparability with data from other actions of the "Hunting the Silent Killer" campaign. Results were subsequently delivered to local physicians (or municipal authorities where no physicians were available) for immediate clinical application following translational medicine postulate.

Feedback

Residents expressed great satisfaction and gratitude for the free screenings, emphasizing the desire for the campaign to be repeated annually. They especially appreciated the presence of volunteers on their island, which provided access to preventive health services and the opportunity to discuss personal health. The high level of professionalism and organization of the entire team was also praised.

Students reported significant satisfaction as well, noting that the campaign enabled them to develop practical skills and confidence in patient interactions, while fostering a sense of social responsibility and teamwork.

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Conclusion

The positive feedback received confirms the success and educational value of the project for both citizens and students. The "Hunting the Silent Killer" campaign with this mobile examination team represents a model for a successful public health program led by the Croatian League for Hypertension, combining prevention, education, and multidisciplinary collaboration. Its long-term goal is to boost health literacy, lower hypertension and related disease risks, and make healthcare more efficient and cost-effective.

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