

## Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

### Meeting Report

Wednesday 30/03/2022 at 15:00

#### 1. Ukraine – current health challenges and EU action

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Commissioner Kyriakides provided a brief up-date on the assistance provided by the EU and its Member States to Ukraine and neighbouring countries. On 29/3, EU health ministers discussed the situation in Ukraine at length, where they confirmed the very strong EU solidarity with Ukraine, and their willingness to receive patients and relieve pressure on healthcare systems from frontline countries. The Commission adopted last week a Communication on support to those fleeing Ukraine, confirming that all displaced persons are granted full access to healthcare in the EU. The EU is also promoting vaccination for those arriving, notably for COVID-19, measles and poliomyelitis. Commissioner Kyriakides also informed about a recent request from Ukraine to include women ‘dignity kits’ as part of the medical equipment delivered through humanitarian assistance.

Experts from frontline Member States presented the situation in their country, and how they cope with large inflows of displaced persons from Ukraine. Logistics are being organised in a sustainable manner. Mental health support constitutes a major issue for people fleeing affected conflict areas. The number of HIV patients arriving is increasing and continuity of treatment is being ensured for them. The platform member from Hungary suggested that HERA gets in touch with WHO Country Directors to keep them informed about EU response and support possibilities.

Platform members discussed issues regarding vaccination, including the importance of knowing the vaccination status of those arriving, ideally by having access to data from Ukrainian vaccination registries. Another topic raised was the use of medicines for Ukrainian patients that may differ from those used in the EU (e.g. for HIV, tuberculosis or cancer treatment). EMA is following closely this topic and providing advice as appropriate. So far, it has always been possible to identify alternatives to treatments not available/authorised in the EU.

ECDC informed about its close contacts with frontline countries. Main issues highlighted in these exchanges concerned disease surveillance efforts, vaccine acceptance among people arriving from Ukraine, as well as the ability of healthcare systems to absorb influx of patients in a sustainable fashion. ECDC informed about relevant publications: on the [prevention and control of infectious diseases in the context of Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine](#) and on [COVID-19 testing, vaccination and implementation of protective measures recommended for reception centres of displaced people from Ukraine](#), translated in 5 languages including Ukrainian. ECDC is also working with WHO on communication

material aiming to increase vaccination and to develop key points for healthcare providers to consider for people arriving from Ukraine. An ECDC team is currently operating in Poland as part of a broader team deployed by the Commission.

## **2. COVID-19 Epidemiological situation and update on vaccines and therapeutics**

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Commissioner Kyriakides informed about a request by health ministers made at the latest health council from several Member States to consider whether a second booster would be needed, in particular for those most at risk. They mandated the Commission to come forward with a proposal for a coordinated approach.

ECDC provided an up-date on the epidemiological situation in the EU/EEA, where we observe an overall resurgence of cases, affecting all age groups at the same time, which is typical when resulting from a lifting of measures. This high incidence is so far not matched by an increase in hospitalisation, ICU admission and deaths. ICU admission is looked at carefully – as it proves to be a finer indicator than hospitalisation and death, for which COVID-19 may be incidental (i.e. hospitalisation/death ‘with’ covid, rather than ‘because’ of covid).

In some countries, ICU occupancy is relatively high. Predictions forecast an increase in cases in the coming weeks, including also to some extent of mortality. ECDC performed a detailed analysis to review hospitalisation rates among unvaccinated individuals, people vaccinated with 2-doses or boosted. The results show a much higher incidence of severe cases among unvaccinated individuals. It also indicates that the Omicron variant does cause severe illness among unvaccinated. The protective effect of vaccination against severe disease seems long-lasting as vaccinated non-boosted individuals do not seem at a particularly high risk of severe disease. Since vaccines are not highly effective against infection from omicron, the increase in cases may not necessarily be caused by waning.

In terms of circulating variants, Omicron represents close to 100% of samples sequenced in the EU, with 0.1% of Delta. The BA.2 sublineage is now dominant in almost all EU countries, representing overall 66.5% of sequenced samples.

Vaccination coverage has been stagnating for some time and reaches 83.2% among adults. There is still a slight progression in individuals receiving booster doses.

Regarding post-covid condition, it appears that it can also happen among mild cases, including vaccinated. In this respect, the current high incidence may have an impact on overall disease burden in the midterm.

Experts exchanged on the situation in their country, in particular regarding the current BA.2 wave. Several experts pointed that patients in ICU with the current wave are primarily immunocompromised individuals. Experts exchanged on the use of available COVID-19 therapeutics and future perspectives for treatments. Experts also shared national approaches regarding the administration of a 4<sup>th</sup> vaccine dose, with a number of

Member States administering it to immunocompromised and high risk individuals, while some Member States are introducing a cut-off age above which a fourth dose is recommended.

EMA is constantly monitoring emerging data on vaccine safety and effectiveness. EMA will review the latest data emanating from observational studies from Israel and the US. While a recent pre-print from Israel tends to show a high relative risk reduction, the absolute risk reduction appears to be low. EMA recalled that the administration of a 4<sup>th</sup> dose for immunocompromised individuals is already supported by EMA (the primary course consisting of 3 doses). EMA also updated on other tools to be considered for these individuals, such as Evusheld.

EMA is starting the rolling review of a vaccine by HIPRA designed for heterologous boosting. This vaccine could have interesting properties for e.g. boosting in the autumn if necessary. Novavax, Sanofi Pasteur and Valneva are expected to submit additional data in the coming weeks. Finally, EMA updated on ongoing work by vaccine manufacturers on adapted vaccines, with Moderna developing a bivalent vaccine and Pfizer/BioNTech prioritising work on a monovalent Omicron vaccine.

### **3. Conclusions and suggestions for future agenda points**

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The next meeting is scheduled on 11 April at 16:00 hours.

## **Participation**

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### Member States participants:

1. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
2. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
3. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
4. Professor Helene PROBST (Denmark)
5. Professor Toivo MAIMETS (Estonia)
6. Professor Taneli PUUMALAINEN (Finland)
7. Professor Arnaud FONTANET (France)
8. Dr Veronique HEON-KLIN (Germany)
9. Professor Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
10. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
11. Dr Flavia RICCARDO (Italy)
12. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
13. Professor Jean-Claude SCHMIT (Luxembourg)
14. Dr Charles MALLIA-AZZOPARDI (Malta)
15. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
16. Professor Henrique BARROS (Portugal)
17. Professor Diana PAUN (Romania)
18. Professor Pavol JARCUSKA (Slovakia)
19. Mr Milan KREK (Slovenia)
20. Professor Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

### European Commission:

21. Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner (Chair)
22. Professor Peter Piot, Special Advisor to EU Commission President
23. Giorgos Rossides, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
24. Roberto Reig Rodrigo, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
25. John F. Ryan, Acting Deputy Director General, DG SANTE
26. Maria Luisa Llano Cardenal, Cabinet Expert, Vice-President Schinas
27. Panayiotis Pourgourides, Cabinet Expert, Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
28. Karolina Herbout-Borzczak, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
29. Ralf Kuhne, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
30. Daphne Von Buxhoeveden, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
31. Emiliou Emiliou, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
32. Sarah Curran, Policy Assistant to Prof. Piot
33. Thomas Van Cangh, Policy Assistant to the Director General, DG SANTE
34. Clement Williamson, Policy Assistant to the Director General, HERA
35. Sigrid Weiland, Policy Officer, Strategy and Coordination Unit, DG SANTE
36. Nicolas Pradalie, Secretariat General
37. Hanna Herzig, HERA

38. Georgios Pepios, Trainee – Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides

ECDC:

39. Bruno Ciancio, Head of Surveillance

40. Antonis Lanaras, Head of Section European and International Cooperation

EMA:

41. Marco Cavaleri, Head of the office Anti-infectives and Vaccines

42. Zigmars Sebris, Strategic Support and crisis coordination officer