

## **European Commission’s advisory panel on COVID-19**

### **Report – videoconference Sunday 25/10/2020 at 18:00**

The President outlined the deteriorating epidemiological situation across the EU and underlined the importance of coordinated analysis and measures. In particular, a common testing approach is needed in the EU as is supporting promising treatments, diagnostic tools and vaccine candidates.

The President explained that the Commission would adopt a COVID-19 package on 28/10 and a discussion at EUCO would follow.

The discussion focused on the different agenda points.

#### **1. Recommendations on testing strategies**

The Panel welcomed the common approach and considered the text to be solid. It was important to stress that each type of test needs to be used depending on the specific context and that the majority of tests being developed today are diagnostic tools rather than screening ones. A clearly essential element of any common testing approach is implementation by all Member States and ensuring mutual recognition of results.

Regarding rapid tests (antigen tests), the Panel explained their technical characteristics and how they are used in different Member States. The experts agreed that they can be a useful tool to complement PCR tests but that due to their current specifications, they cannot replace them.

In particular, rapid tests are best used in settings with high incidence and where it is expected that the virus is present (i.e. positive results are expected). The Panel cautioned against using rapid tests only and also stressed that self-testing (not used in the EU) has important shortcomings (e.g. sampling, loss of centralised information, etc.).

The Panel agreed that testing remains an essential tool to curb the transmission of the virus but that this can only be achieved if there is a robust contact tracing capacity at Member State level and quarantine/isolation is strictly followed.

The Panel asked for a comprehensive overview of what Member States are doing regarding testing (particularly on the use of rapid tests). An outline of the different approaches was seen as very useful tool to decide on their use across the EU and on how to prioritise the settings where they can be most useful.

#### **2. Communication on additional COVID response measures – What role for the EU?**

The President asked the Panel what more could the EU do to support Member States in controlling the spread of the virus. The previous Communications on exit strategies and preparedness outlined the key measures to be taken but implementation in Member States has been uneven. The President enquired about the key messages for policy-makers and citizens.

The Panel agreed that there is a need to pass a strong message of working together to overcome the pandemic. The false dichotomy between “saving livelihood and saving lives” was mentioned as a recurrent problem. Experience shows that those that prioritise public health also save the economy.

The experts stressed that corona fatigue is real and it is very difficult to address it. Similarly, it is clear that as the numbers deteriorate, there will be a need to take more restrictive measures. However, it is not entirely clear what to prioritise and how to justify different measures in different Member States affected by the same virus. It was argued that it might be better to have less measures that are well implemented than new measures frequently that are not fully implemented or complied with.

The Panel argued in favour of support measures for those most vulnerable to COVID-19 and affected by restrictive measures (e.g. targeted lockdowns).

The need to tackle travelling in a common way was mentioned as was the need to increase the uptake of contact tracing apps which are seen as a robust complement to traditional contact tracing.

The Panel stressed that the common goal of keeping virus transmission low until there is a safe and effective vaccine or good treatments must be emphasised at all levels.

As mentioned in previous meetings, the Panel underlined the importance of expert communication to convey clear messages to the public and therefore contribute to compliance, a long-term outlook and vaccine acceptance. The need for a common communication strategy for all Member States was mentioned.

Finally, the Panel asked for a forum at EU level where epidemiologists and other experts advising governments could exchange good practices and move together towards common measures/recommendations.

**Participants in the videoconference:**

- European Commission: President von der Leyen, Commissioner Kyriakides, K. Vanderberghe, A. Whelan, J. Bray, G. Rossides, R. Reig Rodrigo, S. Gallina, I. Juhansone, I. Valero,
- Peter Piot (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)
- Arnaud Fontenot (Institut Pasteur)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)
- Marion Koopman (Erasmus MC)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute)
- Fernando Simon (Coordination Centre for Health Alerts and Emergencies, Spain)

**Observers:**

- Andrea Ammon (ECDC Director)

**Excused:**

- Christian Drosten (Charité)
- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)