

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

### Meeting Report

**Tuesday 29/11/2022 at 11:00**

Commissioner Kyriakides and Professor Piot introduced this first in person meeting of the EU Scientific Advice Platform recalling that the pandemic is still not over, and that preparedness was still a priority.

#### **1. COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy and communication**

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Professor Heidi Larson presented the latest report on the [“State of Vaccine Confidence in the EU \(2022\)”](#), the region historically characterised by the lowest rates of confidence in vaccines. Data published suggests a recent surge in vaccine hesitancy since 2022, especially among younger age groups and Eastern European countries regarding COVID-19 vaccines. Results indicate that healthcare professionals are also concerned about the safety of vaccines, especially regarding vaccines during pregnancy. Survey results also illustrate an overall agreement in 2022 that the seasonal influenza vaccine is important and safe, although down slightly across the EU since 2020, but up since 2018. Recommendations focus on building back confidence, especially among the youth, by improving communication and embedding the vaccines in the context of other health issues.

Participants highlighted the difficulty of coming up with a clear message on vaccines during the pandemic due to the rapidly evolving science. Experts agreed on the importance of transparency, notably by acknowledging scientific uncertainties, and discussed the role of political and social factors affecting vaccine confidence, including misinformation. Some participants supported further investments in tailored communication on vaccines.

ECDC mentioned the work carried out together with the EMA aiming at restoring confidence in vaccines through targeted events on safety and epidemiology in countries where low vaccine confidence translated into low coverage. A [vaccine information portal](#), funded by the European Commission, was also launched two years ago for the same purpose.

Finally, participants exchanged on national experiences with the use of the Digital COVID-19 Certificate, originally designed to safeguard free movement of people.

## **2. COVID-19 medical countermeasures**

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After a presentation by the Director-General of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA), Pierre Delsaux, participants exchanged on medical countermeasures against COVID-19. Regarding vaccines, participants mentioned the overall success of the COVID-19 vaccination strategy and discussed the evolution of clinical trials in the future as well as the possibility for innovation in vaccines to improve acceptance among citizens. Among identified areas for innovation were the development of vaccines providing longer lasting immunity, less side effects and further preventing transmission.

The discussion also focused on therapeutics and the potential for antivirals and other treatments, notably for immunocompromised. Different categories of therapeutics might also prove useful in the context of vaccine hesitancy.

Both Commissioner Kyriakides and participants called for solidarity for the development of medical countermeasures in Europe, a highly competitive field in the world.

## **3. Long COVID – impact, characterisation, public health response**

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The Director-General for Health and Food Safety, Sandra Gallina, presented the results of different European studies on long COVID, affecting, according to a recent [systematic literature review by ECDC](#), around 1 in 8 people infected with COVID-19. Despite the growing scientific data on long COVID, there still exists some uncertainties regarding the case definition and the prevalence of the syndrome due to the heterogenic nature of symptoms, also blurring the divide between infectious and non-communicable diseases. DG Gallina stressed the need to clarify the list of symptoms and their measurement, as well as the need for a methodology for research involving patients and based on scientific evidence.

DG Gallina also emphasised the equity issues related to long COVID, both in terms of vulnerability and access to care. The multi-morbidity associated to long COVID also represents an important challenge, and participants exchanged on the recent Commission Recommendation to recognise long COVID as an occupational disease as it mainly affects people aged 35-49 and disproportionately people with low pay professions. Participants mentioned that research on long COVID might be useful for other similar conditions such as post-infectious syndrome or chronic fatigue.

DG Gallina introduced an upcoming Opinion from the Commission's Expert Panel on effective ways of investing in health. Its main recommendations regarding Long COVID include the co-production, together with patients, of research taking into account the level of heterogeneity within the population and embedded at all levels of care, including rehabilitation. The Expert Panel also called for the development of co-ordinated models of primary care aiming at tackling comorbidity and for the establishment of a programme of surveillance systems, including data from each Member State and using consistent methodologies whilst encompassing the impact of this condition on health, employment

and the economy. Vaccination and reducing transmission to reduce COVID-19 infections must remain a priority.

Commissioner Kyriakides noted the advancement already made on the topic, with the creation of an EU-wide long COVID patients group, already liaising closely with the Commission.

### **Next steps on COVID-19, influenza and other health security challenges**

Professor Peter Piot, Special Advisor to the European Commission President, updated on the evolution of the COVID-19 situation, highlighting the difficulty in predicting future scenarios and provided an update on other health security challenges. He warned of risks posed by the recent waves of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) and the occurrence of polio cases, especially among children. Regarding the increasing risk of pathogen spillovers due to a synergy of causes, among which climate change, Professor Piot stressed the need for further collaboration between Member States, European Commission and agencies for better preparedness, not only focusing on respiratory viruses, but also on vector-borne diseases.

Participants discussed possible future orientations of the platform such as:

- Cross-country knowledge sharing (comparisons of scientific evidence, trials, etc.)
- Drawing lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic
- Extending the group's interest beyond COVID-19, to long COVID, other infectious diseases or antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and broader health security issues
- Working on surveillance programmes (with harmonised standards) Involving communication experts, with an understanding of the generational divide and better digital literacy skills
- Creating an EU equivalent to the WHO One Health High Level Expert Panel

DG Gallina informed participants of the restructuring of DG SANTE centred around the One Health approach and the ongoing work of the unit following the work of Recovery and Resilience Facility aimed at supporting investments, notably in health.

Commissioner Kyriakides thanked participants and suggested to hold the next virtual meeting in January 2023.

## **Participation**

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### Member States participants:

1. Professor Markus MÜLLER (Austria)
2. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
3. Professor Alemka MARKOTIĆ (Croatia)
4. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
5. Professor Toivo MAIMETS (Estonia)
6. Mr Taneli PUUMALAINEN (Finland)
7. Dr Christophe BAYER (Germany)
8. Professor Miklós SZÓCSKA (Hungary)
9. Professor Bridget SMYTH (Ireland)
10. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
11. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
12. Dr. Jean-Claude SCHMIT (Luxembourg)
13. Professor Tjalling LEENSTRA (Netherlands)
14. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
15. Dr Mario FAFANGEL (Slovenia)
16. Professor Fernando SIMÓN (Spain)

### European Commission:

17. Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner (Chair)
18. Professor Peter Piot, Special Advisor to EU Commission President
19. Sandra Gallina, Director-General, DG SANTE
20. Pierre Delsaux, Director-General of the Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA)
21. Giorgos Rossides, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
22. Daphne Von Buxhoeveden, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
23. Nicolas Pradalié, Policy Assistant to the Director General, DG SANTE
24. Thomas Van Cangh, Acting Head of Unit, Policy Strategy Unit, DG SANTE
25. Marta Valenciano, Intelligence Analyst - Lead Epidemiologist, Policy Strategy Unit, DG SANTE
26. Anne Auffret, Policy Assistant to Director General, HERA
27. Isabel Holmquist, Policy Officer HERA
28. Hannah Herzig, Policy Coordinator, HERA
29. Ornella Martinello, Secretariat General

### University of Antwerp:

30. Heidi Larson, Professor of Anthropology and Risk, and Director, Vaccine Confidence Project.

### ECDC:

31. Dr Andrea Ammon, Director

### EMA:

32. Emer Cooke – Executive Director

33. Dr Marco Cavaleri - Head of Biological Health Threats and Vaccines Strategy,