

Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Friday 13/11/2020 at 17:00

1. Opening and mandate of the Group

President von der Leyen opened the meeting by thanking the experts for their hard work in the fight against COVID-19 and for joining the EU scientific advice platform.

This group will provide a platform for peer exchange and coordination among scientific advisors to national governments, offering a space for sharing good practices and mutual learning. It complements the President's COVID-19 advisory panel and the work of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The idea was presented on October 29th to EU Leaders where discussions touched upon many issues that benefit from co-ordinated scientific advice to face similar problems across the EU. This group will choose the topics that are the most urgent to discuss. It will be chaired by Commissioner Kyriakides, with support and scientific advice from Prof. Peter Piot. The platform will meet as regularly as needed, likely twice per month.

Participants introduced themselves and presented the challenges faced in their country and their expectations from the platform. They stressed the importance of learning from each other through practical experiences, with a shared objective of bringing the pandemic under control. Relevant topics proposed for discussion included a coordinated approach to the upcoming holiday season and related travel, coordinated 'exit strategies' from the measures currently in place in many Member States, and vaccines and immunisation strategies.

2. A European Health Union

Commissioner Kyriakides informed participants about a series of proposals adopted by the Commission on 11 November on a European Health Union to reinforce the EU preparedness and resilience framework. The Commission proposals include a strengthening of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). They constitute a key step in building a 'Health Union'. Next year, the Commission make a proposal for a Health Emergency Response Authority (HERA) to better anticipate and respond to future health crises.

3. Testing strategies and approaches to quarantine

The platform discussed the use of COVID-19 tests, with a particular emphasis on rapid antigen tests.

The Commission informed that it is preparing a Recommendation on the use of rapid antigen tests to be adopted next week, looking into issues such as the settings in which the use of such tests is recommended, the importance of a European validation of tests as well as the mutual recognition of test results. This Recommendation will be a living document considering the fast pace of innovation in this domain. The Commission is also purchasing rapid antigen tests for Member States through the Emergency Support Instrument and has launched a joint public procurement procedure allowing Member States to purchase tests themselves.

Participants exchanged on their national approaches to testing, ranging from the use of rapid antigen tests for individual diagnosis to mass screening. While recognising their limitations, they acknowledged the usefulness of rapid antigen tests. Such tests provide rapid results that allow isolating cases and initiating contact tracing early, and they contribute to reducing the pressure on laboratories performing PCR tests. Advisors exchanged on settings where rapid antigen tests are most appropriate (such as high prevalence settings where the positive predictive value of tests is higher, like triage for hospitalisations or contact tracing in outbreak control). Several participants emphasised the importance of a coordinated approach to tests validation, especially considering the high number of products that are coming into the market.

Follow up: A discussion on a possible common approach to tests validation among Member States could be held in the context of the Health Security Committee

The Slovakian member shared its recent experience with mass testing using rapid antigen tests. Overall, 85% of the target population (between 12 and 65 year old) was covered, corresponding to 66% of the general population. Results are being analysed and prepared for publication in view of drawing and sharing lessons from this experience.

Participants briefly exchanged on the topic of quarantine, where different approaches and durations are applied in countries. While WHO and ECDC currently recommend a 14-day quarantine (possibly reduced to 10 days accompanied with a negative test on day 10), there is a clear need to adopt pragmatic measures from a public health perspective to ensure compliance and, as a result, overall effectiveness in practice. A strength of this platform will be its capacity to go beyond scientific and academic considerations to address practical issues associated with the concrete implementation of public health measures.

Throughout the discussion, several experts referred to documents (e.g. test validation results) produced at national level.

Follow up: Advisors are encouraged to share relevant documents concerning the topics discussed with the platform

Commissioner Kyriakides closed the meeting and thanked all participants for their useful contributions. The next meeting will take place on Friday November 20 at 17:00, to continue discussions on testing and on quarantines, covering also compliance and, more broadly, the issue of pandemic fatigue.

Participation

Platform participants:

1. Professor Markus MÜLLER (Austria)
2. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
3. Dr. Angel KUNCHEV (Bulgaria)
4. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
5. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
6. Professor Irja LUTSAR (Estonia)
7. Professor Taneli PUUMALAINEN (Finland)
8. Professor Arnaud FONTANET (France)
9. Dr. Hans-Ulrich HOLTHERM (Germany)
10. Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
11. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
12. Ronan Glynn (Ireland)
13. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
14. Dr Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
15. Professor Edita FYI SUZIEDELIENE (Lithuania)
16. Dr Jean- Claude Schmit (Luxembourg)
17. Dr Charles MALLIA AZZOPARDI (Malta)
18. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
19. Professor Henrique DE BARROS (Portugal)
20. Mrs Diana Loreta PAUN (Romania)
21. Professor Pavol JARCUSKA (Slovakia)
22. Mr. Milan KREK (Slovenia)
23. Fernando SIMÓN (Spain)
24. Dr Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

European Commission:

- President Ursula VON DER LEYEN
- Commissioner Stella KYRIAKIDES (Chair)
- Prof. Peter PIOT, Special Advisor to the President of the European Commission
- Björn Seibert, Head of President’s Cabinet
- Giorgos ROSSIDES, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Roberto Reig Rodrigo, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Kurt Vandenberghe, Member of President’s Cabinet
- Andrea AMMON, Director ECDC
- Peter WAGNER, Secretariat General
- Jeremy Bray, Secretariat General
- Director General Sandra GALLINA, DG SANTE
- Thomas Van-Cangh, Policy Assistant to Director General Gallina