

Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Wednesday 15/03/2022 at 17:30

1. Ukraine – latest developments and health needs

Commissioner Kyriakides provided a brief up-date on the assistance provided by the EU to Ukraine and its neighbouring countries. Acknowledging the impressive support and care provided by the neighbouring countries to the Ukrainian refugees, she emphasised the need to ensure that their health care systems are not overwhelmed. For this reason, amongst others, a European solidarity mechanism for the evacuations of refugees in need of specialised hospital treatment and care has been established so that patients can move from the bordering countries to Member States with available hospital capacity. This includes beds for paediatric patients, for neonates and their mothers, for cancer patients, for those with burns, and for those requiring treatment in ICUs.

The experts from neighbouring Member States (Hungary (HU), Poland (PL), Slovakia (SK), and Romania (RO)) reported on the situation in their countries. So far, displaced persons are generally leaving the reception centres quite quickly and are either dispersing into the communities or transiting to other countries. However, the situation is changing daily, and persons without relatives and friends start to arrive as well. Experts emphasised that many refugees have chronic diseases and/ or suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome and need immediate treatment. In addition to COVID-19, particular attention needs to be paid to AIDS, tuberculosis and common, vaccine-preventable childhood diseases. In view of this, neighbouring countries are offering vaccinations to the displaced people.

Andrea Ammon, ECDC, reported that the agency has regular meetings with the public health authorities in Ukraine and neighbouring countries in order to be ready to immediately provide specific support when needed, including through staff deployments in the field. ECDC is also updating and adapting guidance documents from previous refugee situations.

2. COVID-19 Epidemiological update

ECDC provided an up-date on the epidemiological situation in the EU/EEA. As of 13 March 2022, the sustained trend of decreasing case rates in the EU/EEA observed in previous weeks changed: the overall 14-day case notification rate increased by 4.6% with a proportionally higher 9.1% increase among people aged 65 years and above. The estimated distribution was 99.7% for Omicron and 0.1% Delta.

Experts discussed the reasons for the observed increase in the notification rates in several Member States as well as the ECDC projections, according to which in the next three weeks, increasing trends in deaths are predicted for nine countries (Austria, Cyprus,

Denmark, Finland, Germany, Lithuania, Slovakia, Spain and Sweden), and hospital admissions are predicted to increase in seven countries (Czechia, France, Iceland, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Malta and Slovenia). The older population groups are disproportionately affected by Omicron, which leads to an increase in hospitalization and deaths. Sub-variant BA.2 is more transmissible compared to BA.1, though there are no signs of increased severity of disease or decreased vaccine effectiveness as compared to BA.1. Many Member States have already lifted most non-pharmaceutical measures and vaccination is stagnating. EMA is monitoring real world data on waning immunity, which may also contribute to the observed trends. ECDC highlighted that substantial changes to testing strategies are currently introduced in some countries, while in others the situation remains unchanged. This makes it very difficult to make meaningful comparisons of reported case rates among countries in a given week, or for a specific country over time.

In view of the observed trends and in order to be prepared for the autumn/ winter season, experts emphasised the need to reinforce vaccination campaigns both for primary and booster vaccinations, including the maintenance of the necessary vaccination infrastructure and addressing communication issues; to consider and prepare for the risk of co-infections with influenza virus in particular in the winter season; to continue the development of adapted and second generation vaccines. Prof. Peter Piot highlighted in particular the importance of having surveillance and early warning systems in place in order not to miss the beginning of a possible new surge and of continuing research on a pan-corona virus vaccine. It was agreed to continue discussions on how to prepare best for the next autumn/ winter season during the next meeting.

3. COVID-19 vaccines and therapeutics

EMA updated on ongoing activities in the field of vaccines and therapeutics. The rolling reviews of the vaccine candidates by Valneva (VLA2001) and Sanofi/ GSK (Vidprevtyn) continue, and the outcome of clinical studies is expected for after Easter. On therapeutics, Evusheld, a combination of two monoclonal antibodies, has been demonstrated to show activity against the sub-variant BA.2 and is expected to enter the formal marketing authorisation procedure soon.

4. AOB

The next meeting is scheduled on 30 March at 15:00 hours.

Participation

Member States 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 Helene PROBST (Denmark)
7. Professor Toivo MAIMETS (Estonia)
8. Dr Ute Teichert (Germany)
9. Professor Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
10. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
11. Dr Darina O’FLANAGAN/Dr Ronan GLYNN (Ireland)
12. Dr Ana Teresa PALAMARA (Italy)
13. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
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. Maria Luisa Llano Cardenal, Cabinet Expert, Vice-President Schinas
26. Panayiotis Pourgourides, Cabinet Expert, Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
27. Ralf Kuhne, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
28. Daphne Von Buxhoeveden, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
29. Emiliou Emiliou, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
30. Sarah Curran, Policy Assistant to Prof. Piot
31. Thomas Van Cangh, Policy Assistant to the Director General, DG SANTE
32. Cristina Modoran, Policy Assistant to the Director General, DG SANTE
33. Clement Williamson, Policy Assistant to the Director General, HERA
34. Sigrid Weiland, Policy Officer, Strategy and Coordination Unit, DG SANTE
35. Jeremy Bray, Secretariat General
36. Hanna Herzig, HERA
37. Georgios Pepios, Trainee – Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides

ECDC:

38. Andrea Ammon, Director

EMA:

39. Emer Cooke, Executive Director

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