

European Commission's advisory panel on COVID-19

Report – audioconference Sunday 5 April 2020 at 18:00

The discussed focused on its key agenda point:

1. Criteria for lifting the social distancing measures and modelling

The President outlined the work being done at EU level to design a possible strategy for lifting in a coordinated fashion the containment measures taken across Europe.

The Panel agreed that such strategy must be understood as related to the lifting of measures but not as the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to communicate clearly that the post-lifting phase will not be like the period before the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus is now part of our lives and we must adapt to it. In this regard, we should also talk about the transition towards a new phase of the measures to contain and mitigate COVID-19 (e.g. from lockdown towards softer measures).

Regarding the criteria that would allow considering the lifting of measures, the Panel agreed that epidemiological criteria (e.g. R rates or ICU capacity) should be complemented by operational ones such as: 1) Testing capacity and strategy (diagnosis and serological); 2) Contact tracing capacity (including the possible use of apps).

It was noted that the different epidemiological situations across the EU and the differences in the healthcare systems in Member States would require built-in flexibility in the strategy to be put forward. However, throughout the discussion, the need for EU level guidelines and recommendations was underlined. In particular, the Panel requested EU steering regarding: 1) App development for contact tracing; 2) Testing strategies (what tests, who to test, etc.) and validation; 3) A database of studies with key methodological information to filter them in order to make emerging data and results accessible to other Member States.

The importance of considering educational institutions in the lifting of measures was mentioned. Different considerations can be assessed on whether to leave schools and high schools closed until the very end or on the contrary start opening them progressively. The issue of how to manage summer holidays and the flow of tourists was highlighted.

The use of masks by the general public was discussed. As scientific evidence on the transmission channels of the virus evolves, so must the advice provided. However, the Panel agreed that no new evidence indicates the effectiveness of medical level masks for the general public. It was suggested that community (home-made) masks could be useful barriers to limit the spread of the virus if combined with the already taken measures (social distancing, etc.) and in certain circumstances (environments where many people gather, for example). WHO and ECDC are working on updated advice.

Finally, the Panel discussed the current efforts to model the spread of the virus and the need for further data. Many studies are on-going and there is a need to ensure they are used when modelling different scenarios. The Panel called for an EU database of studies (open and easily accessible).

The general point was made that any strategy will have to use many different tools and systems in a strategically joined up manner with one group of people analysing data in real time.

The next meeting will be organised after Easter.

Participants in the audioconference:

- European Commission: President von der Leyen, Commissioner Kyriakides, T. De Groot, F. Carlucci, K. Vandenberghe, R. Reig Rodríguez
- Marion Koopman (Erasmus MC)
- Arnaud Fontenet (Institut Pasteur)
- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute, Copenhagen)

Excused:

- Peter Piot (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)
- Christian Drosten (Charité)

Observers:

- Andrea Ammon (ECDC Director)