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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

Public health
Health security

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Health Security Committee 29/12/2022
Audio meeting on the current situation of COVID-19 in China and related travel
to/from the EU
Flash Report

Chair: Director-General, European Commission, DG SANTE B2

Director General DG SANTE – Sandra Gallina chaired the HSC meeting on 29.12.2022 on the current situation of COVID-19 in China and looking particularly at the potential of increased travel from China to the EU member states as a result of lifting of travel restrictions from China. There was a wide participation from MSs, EEA countries, Professor Peter Piot, WHO, EMA, ECDC, and relevant Commission services – in total over 105 Member State representatives online. The meeting was held to discuss potential measures including testing, sequencing, advice for travellers in both directions, and vaccination of EU citizens in China. While IPCR is the forum to decide about potential measures, the HSC task is to coordinate such decisions from the public health perspective.

Professor Peter Piot stressed the importance of a united voice in Europe. Opening of borders and Chinese New Year will likely trigger travel to Europe. Several countries are imposing travel restrictions – USA, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan – Europe needs to consider the consequences of not acting, the need for a precautionary approach, and confidence in Chinese data. In these circumstances of unclear data, appropriate measures are difficult to define. We have to be careful when imposing travel restrictions, but it could be justified if we can avoid (or delay) the introduction of a new variant into the EU. In this respect, sequencing of variants will be of utmost importance. Professor Piot also mentioned that some Member States have low rates of Covid vaccination, and that their citizens could therefore be at risk of exposure.

ECDC presented an update on epidemiological Covid-19 situation in China and info on circulating variants. The ECDC director pointed out that this could be an occasion to reinforce the call for more testing/sequencing, and for more vaccination.

Several countries took the floor. All were supportive of a coordinated approach and appreciated DG SANTE action to coordinate via the Health security Committee. Some Member states do not consider that measures are currently needed in respect of travellers from China, but nevertheless supported strengthened surveillance and sequencing. Others mentioned the lack of reliable data on the health situation in China and the potential for further variants to emerge and the potential for further evolutions given the size of the Chinese population and the zoonotic reservoir. Some countries indicated the existence of sequencing at national level and of wastewater surveillance, (some mentioning specific surveillance of wastewater in airports). The ECDC pointed out that they can provide sequencing capacity via a framework contract, and that this is available for member states to use. The Italian representative spoke about the national measures intended to impose testing and sequencing of positive results in the case of travellers from China and stressed that the Italian measures were aimed at a better surveillance and could be followed by other member states to have a more complete picture of circulating variants. The representative of DG HOME presented the latest Council Recommendation on third country travel to the EU in relation to COVID-19 and emphasised the importance of coordinated and science-based approaches. The issue of potential shortages of pharmaceuticals originating in China was raised, and the Commission was asked to analyse potential shortages which could impact the EU.

Conclusions and the message from the Chair:

1. Wide agreement on need for coordination of measures
2. We need to develop advice for EU citizens travelling to China and could propose an advice sheet for incoming travellers from China, to be adapted nationally.
3. Strong support for increased surveillance, particularly taking advantage of the ECDC sequencing contract. Agreed to continue and if necessary, introduce wastewater surveillance.
4. Examine potential impacts of Chinese COVID-19 outbreak on exports of pharmaceutical products and API to Europe.
5. Complete HSC survey on national measures, if any, and keep updated.
6. Possibility to call another HSC meeting at short notice to continue discussion.
7. Presidency to indicate possible IPCR meeting.