

European Commission's advisory panel on COVID-19

Report – audioconference Sunday 22/03/2020 at 18:00

The President introduced Commissioner Gabriel and Guido Rasi who joined the audioconference. She stressed the exploratory nature of the discussions and the need to come back to these complex issues in the future.

1) Criteria for lifting measures

The Panel insisted that the focus must be kept on the implementation for a sufficiently long time of the current social distancing measures. It was felt that more effort should be put on explaining the need for distancing measures.

In view of preparing for when the spread of the virus is under control, it is important to develop robust criteria to eventually lift – as much as possible in a coordinated manner - some of these measures and establish alternative ones to monitor and curb the expansion of the virus.

When considering lifting some of measures introduced, it is important to develop different categories (e.g. physical distance vs. closure of schools, etc.) which allow gradual lifting of measures as the epidemiological situation evolves. In addition, the criteria could include the healthcare capacity, acquired immunity, Personal Protective Equipment availability, etc.

The work on therapeutics and vaccination will also be determinant when designing exit strategies. Furthermore, the availability of serological tests will allow measuring the acquired immunity among the population.

It was agreed that ensuring the synchronicity of the lifting of measures across the EU would be important, while taking into account country-specific contexts (also in view of country-specific questions that will be raised by the public). Equally important will be the timing for starting to communicate about the lifting of measures.

Finally, it was stressed that it is crucial to define a strategy for adopting new or identical measures if the spread of the virus was detected again. In this context, building sufficient testing and contact tracing capacity and ensuring availability of Personal Protective Equipment will be key. The need to determine what will be required to achieve sufficient capacity in these fields was raised.

The Panel concluded with the need to further model the different trends and scenarios. It was suggested that the ECDC develops a checklist for exit strategies and continues modelling together with the JRC. The importance of having robust data on infection dynamics was stressed (which would also improve with expansion of testing).

The President explained the measures the European Commission is taking to ensure supply of critical equipment.

2) Research and development

The Panel recognised the many efforts being undertaken at global level and notably in the EU. The quick and robust R&D response by the European Commission was welcomed. The role of the EMA in promoting clinical trials with agreed criteria and sufficient critical mass was acknowledged. A similar approach to the one taken when developing the Ebola vaccine, including close cooperation with industry, was suggested.

The development of a vaccine will take time to ensure it is effective and safe but also to have sufficient infrastructure to produce it at high numbers. Given that difficult choices will need to be made in deciding clinical trials and the risk of fragmentation through many small trials, more EU critical mass in terms of coordination and resources are called for. Target groups for clinical trials could include health care workers and vulnerable groups (like elderly).

A separate discussion on manufacturing bottlenecks in the vaccine sector was proposed.

The Panel called for more information sharing on on-going trials, including on negative results, so that the next ones can be better steered. The need to better liaise with the WHO in this field was also raised. More information on trials and studies in China would be welcome.

Considering the efforts being carried out, it was suggested that there is support for researchers on possible business strategies so that promising results can be brought to the market. The EMA referred to its existing networks and scientific advice mechanisms and invited researchers to contact them. The President referred to the need to strengthen global R&D efforts for vaccines and treatments, including by increasing financial support to key international organisations such as CEPI or GAVI. This is likely to be discussed within the G20 framework.

3) AOB

Comments on EU draft recommendations on healthcare systems resilience

The Panel suggested including psychological support to healthcare workers and the need for contingency plans in case of shortages of critical tools. The pressure on laboratories was also mentioned.

On communication

The Panel stressed the importance of explaining to the public the rationale behind the different measures and how Personal Protective Equipment must be prioritised for healthcare workers.

Possible topics for forthcoming meetings:

- Diagnostics in the EU

Follow-up:

- Next phone conference on Wednesday 25/03/2020 at 18:00

Participants in the audioconference:

- European Commission: President von der Leyen, Commissioner Kyriakides, Commissioner Gabriel, I. Juhansone, K. Vandenberghe, R. Reig Rodrigo
- Peter Piot (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)
- Marion Koopman (Erasmus MC)
- Arnaud Fontenet (Institut Pasteur)
- Christian Drosten (Charité)
- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute, Copenhagen)

Observers:

- Andrea Ammon (ECDC Director)
- Guido Rasi (EMA Director)