

Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Thursday 18/03/2021 at 17:00

1. COVID-19 Epidemiological update

ECDC provided an update on the epidemiological situation across the EU. The 14-day case notification rate has been increasing for three weeks for the EU/EEA, with 20 countries reporting increasing numbers. Case rates in older age groups increased in six countries, 15 countries reported increasing hospital or ICU admissions and/or occupancy due to COVID-19 and eight countries reported increasing death rates. Death notifications are still stable or slightly decreasing. The absolute values of the indicators remain high.

Regarding variants of concern, the B.1.1.7 strain appears to be taking over other strains, representing up to 80% of SARS-CoV-2 infections in some countries. The B.1.351 strain is now also more prevalent, with community transmission and outbreaks being reported. The P1 variant remains largely associated with sporadic cases, and most cases are still travel-related. Close monitoring remains critical for all variants of concern. A new ECDC framework contract for sequencing support to Member States is in final stage for signature.

Overall, more than 50 million doses of COVID-19 doses were administered so far. A new improved version of the ECDC vaccine tracker was recently released with more detailed breakdowns (e.g. per target group or per vaccine) and improved visualisations ([link](#)). It is important that MS continue to update the data as regularly as possible.

The French representative provided an update on a new variant observed in the West of France (Britany). Its particularity is its difficulty to diagnose through regular through nasopharyngeal swab. In a recent cluster, proper diagnosis was only possible at a later stage of the disease, taking deep samples. As a result, we could observe more nosocomial outbreaks with this variant. However, there is no sign that it is more transmissible or causes more severe disease. The clade has been uploaded on GISAID.

Experts updated on the situation in their country, with several members referring to the emergence of third waves.

2. COVID-19 vaccination – State of play

EMA informed about the preliminary review of a signal of blood clots in people vaccinated with AstraZeneca's COVID-19 Vaccine, conducted with the Pharmacovigilance and Risk Assessment Committee. The Committee confirmed that:

- the benefits of the vaccine in combating the still widespread threat of COVID-19 (which itself results in clotting problems and may be fatal) continue to outweigh the risk of side effects;

- the vaccine is not associated with an increase in the overall risk of blood clots (thromboembolic events) in those who receive it;
- there is no evidence of a problem related to specific batches of the vaccine or to particular manufacturing sites;
- however, the vaccine may be associated with very rare cases of blood clots associated with thrombocytopenia, i.e. low levels of blood platelets (elements in the blood that help it to clot) with or without bleeding, including rare cases of clots in the vessels draining blood from the brain (CVST).

EMA indicated that the review would continue to look more in details into this signal develop a more robust assessment of key elements such as the background rate against which to measure signals. As a causal relationship with these very rare events cannot be ruled out, a warning will be introduced in the Summary of Product Characteristics (SmPC). EMA is in regular contact with other regulators. The agency will continue to monitor the situation and launch observational studies to better understand any possible risk. Laboratory work and expert group discussions are also ongoing to further refine the understanding of the cause of individual cases of these very rare events.

Experts exchanged on the implications for the national vaccination programmes in different countries. Discussions touched upon the possibility to adapt the target population for the AstraZeneca vaccine, and the need for clear communication to the public.

3. AOB

The next call is scheduled for 26 March 2021 at 15:00 (CET).

Participation

Platform participants:

1. Professor Markus MULLER (Austria)
2. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
3. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
4. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
5. Marika MADAROVA (Czechia)
6. Professor Irja LUTSAR (Estonia)
7. Professor Arnaud FONTANET (France)
8. Dr. Taneli PUUMALAINEN (FINLAND)
9. Dr. Hans-Ulrich HOLTHERM (Germany)
10. Dr. Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
11. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
12. Ms Eibhlin CONNOLLY (Ireland)
13. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
14. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
15. Professor Edita SUZIEDELIENE (Lithuania)
16. Dr Charles Mallia Azzopardi (Malta)
17. Dr Aura Timen (The Netherlands)
18. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
19. Professor Henrique DE BARROS (Portugal)
20. Professor Diana Loreta PAUN (Romania)
21. Mr Milan KREK (Slovenia)
22. Professor Pavol JARCUSKA (Slovakia)
23. Dr Fernando SIMON (Spain)
24. Dr Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

European Commission:

- Commissioner Stella KYRIAKIDES (Chair)
- Giorgos ROSSIDES, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Sandra GALLINA, Director General, DG SANTE
- Prof. Peter PIOT, Special Advisor to the President of the European Commission
- Ms Julia SPENCER, Policy Advisor to Prof. Piot
- Roberto REIG RODRIGO, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Daphne VON BUXHOEVEDEN, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Chrystalla PAPANASTASIOU-CONSTANTINOIU, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Cristina MODORAN, Policy Assistant to Director General Gallina
- Thomas VAN CANGH, Policy Assistant to Director General Gallina

- Sigrid WEILAND, Scientific Assistant to the Special Advisor to the EC President on COVID-19
- Jeremy BRAY, Secretariat General
- Nicolas PRADALIE, Secretariat General

ECDC

- Dr Andrea AMMON, Director
- Helena JOHNSON, Infectious Disease Modeller

EMA

- Marco CAVALLERI, Head of the office Anti-infectives and Vaccines