The European Commission progresses cooperation for the development and availability of key therapeutics for pandemic preparedness

On 22 and 23 November, the Directorate-General for Research and Development (RTD) and the Health Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) organised a multidisciplinary workshop on the development and availability of broad-spectrum antivirals as high priority medical countermeasures for better pandemic preparedness. The workshop brought together participants from 25 countries across the globe with relevant research, regulatory, public health, crisis emergency and response as well as health economy expertise.

The workshop agenda covered all aspects of the drug development cycle, addressing pre-clinical and clinical research aspects, as well as the of development and production landscape to ensure access and availability, in Europe and globally. Discussions highlighted the following:

- Broad-spectrum anti-viral therapeutics are increasingly recognised as one of the tools to be pursued more actively in the context of pandemic preparedness. While vaccines are important to prevent infection or severe disease, therapeutics are equally important to save the lives of infected persons and might possibly prevent infection.
- Innovation is needed to better understand the mechanisms of drug resistance, and novel ways to overcome resistance.
- Moving forward the development, availability and access to broad-spectrum antivirals requires a truly global approach, integrating local innovation and local development. Sustainable partnerships, including research, regulatory and funding partnerships, are key to facilitate such collaborations.
- Sustainable production of broad-spectrum antivirals could be supported by joint procurement and flexible manufacturing capacities for pandemic preparedness, considering risk and cost sharing models. Equitable access to authorised medicines should be a priority.

Overall, the workshop created a welcome momentum for broad-spectrum antiviral therapeutics to become a reliable tool for pandemic preparedness and response. A report with the main conclusions and suggested ways forward will be published in the coming weeks.

Background

Broad-spectrum antivirals are medicines targeting an entire virus family or multiple virus families, therefore having the potential to treat infections caused by different viruses. As such, broad-spectrum antivirals could be an essential tool for pandemic crisis preparedness and early response, in particular when pathogen-specific treatment is not readily available, e.g. in the case of an emerging viral pathogen or new virus variant.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a great challenge to public health in the EU and worldwide, disrupting societies and the economies in unprecedented ways. It has also been a wake-up call to the international research and public health community of the importance to invest in prevention and preparedness for pandemics.

In summer 2022, HERA, together with the Member States, identified three specific high impact health threats, including pathogens with high pandemic potential[1]. Broad-spectrum antivirals are seen as key tools that could help in tackling these pathogens. Insufficient availability and access to specific antiviral treatments lead to delays from the development and production scale-up and the thus could exponentially increase the damage in terms of human lives, health and resources if another public health threat were to emerge. For these reasons, their development and sufficient access are key to ensure proper preparedness and response.

The European Commission will continue to support research for the development of tools such as broad-spectrum antivirals to prevent and combat epidemics and pandemics. Funding opportunities will be available under Horizon Europe as well as under the EU4Health Work Programme 2023.

[1] HERA factsheet - HEALTH UNION: Identifying top 3 priority health threats (europa.eu)