

European Commission's advisory panel on COVID-19

Report – videoconference Thursday 12/11/2020 at 19:30

The President outlined the progress made since the last call. In particular, she presented the content of the Commission's Communication adopted on 28/10 focused on additional measures to tackle the COVID-19 resurgence in the EU (role of antigen tests, need for increased data sharing, contact tracing apps and interoperability gateway, extension of green lanes, etc.).

The President confirmed the creation of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19 gathering top advisors to EU Heads of State or Government. Its first meeting is planned for 13/11.

The discussion focused on the different agenda points.

1. Recommendations on antigen tests and on quarantines

The Panel confirmed that any recommendation has to be seen as a living document. As we learn more about the virus and new technologies become available, the different recommendations will need updating.

The Panel agreed that the number one issue to be solved relates to EU validation of tests. While the self-certification by manufacturers ensures safety, it is not enough to distinguish between high performing tests and others. It is important that a common solution be found to increase trust in these tests and stop wasting resources at national level by duplicating assessments and validation.

The Panel referred to the recent mass testing experiences (Slovakia and Liverpool) as learning opportunities.

The use of antigen tests was discussed. As before, it is clear that these tests have a clear added value in certain settings but not in all. For example, the Panel agreed that antigen tests can be useful diagnostic tools but fail at screening unless in situations of expected high incidence.

Regarding quarantines, the Panel confirmed the ECDC and WHO guidance of 14 days duration. It explained that these long quarantines can be shortened with a PCR test on day 10. However, for this to be useful it requires receiving the PCR test results as soon as possible as it otherwise leads to wasting testing capacity and resources. It was also mentioned that in periods of high incidence, the day 10 PCR in asymptomatic contacts could have a limited effect (in absolute numbers) in controlling the transmission while it could divert scarce laboratory resources.

The Panel agreed that it might be important for policy-makers to consider other criteria when defining the length of quarantines but such a decision would not be based exclusively on scientific evidence and on public health considerations.

It was agreed that shorter quarantines might increase compliance and this should be an important element to consider. Similarly, specific quarantine rules might be justified for specific settings and target groups (e.g. healthcare workers).

2. SARS-CoV-2 and minks

The Panel discussed the recent reports on SARS-CoV-2 and minks in Denmark and other countries. The transmission of the virus among minks appeared to be extremely fast and the containment of new virus strains (after mutating in minks) seemed difficult.

The Panel stressed the importance of controlling the expansion of the virus among minks and the need to consider higher biosecurity measures and even culling. The main concern appeared to be the possibility of reservoirs of the virus in wild minks and the jump to other species of wild animals. This would be a serious concern as we focus all efforts on controlling the pandemic in humans.

The Panel confirmed on-going scientific work to assess the different strains and their potential impact on future vaccines (e.g. if the new strains are resistant to antibodies).

Participants in the videoconference:

- European Commission: President von der Leyen, Commissioner Kyriakides, K. Vanderberghe, A. Whelan, J. Bray, G. Rossides, R. Reig Rodrigo, I. Juhansone, S. Gallina,
- Peter Piot (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)
- Marion Koopman (Erasmus MC)
- Christian Drosten (Charité)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute)
- Fernando Simon (Coordination Centre for Health Alerts and Emergencies, Spain)
- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)
- Miklos Szocska (Director of The Health Services Management Training Centre of the Semmelweis University)

Observers:

- Andrea Ammon (ECDC Director)

Excused:

- Arnaud Fontenot (Institut Pasteur)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)