

Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Friday 05/03/2021 at 17:00

1. COVID-19 Epidemiological update

ECDC provided an update on the epidemiological situation across the EU, which remains very serious. The death notification rate is declining overall, however 21 countries in the EU/EEA reported increasing case notification rates and/or test positivity. The absolute values of the indicators remain high, suggesting that transmission is still widespread. There are currently no indications that public health measures can be lifted.

ECDC informed about the support available through its sequencing support contract. Last week, 10 countries used it for close to 2000 samples. Three more countries have expressed interest in making use of this support contract. A larger framework contract is in preparation which will include support by the Commission and can be used to ramp up national capacities.

ECDC modelling group presented ongoing work on a framework for adjusting public health measures to evolving epidemiological parameters, including vaccination coverage. ECDC is working with Prof. Piot on this framework for tuning response measures, in view of their possible lifting when conditions are met. Such a framework would not be prescriptive, but supportive of a coordinated approach across European countries, even though a significant de-escalation of measures is not yet on the agenda. Yet, a time will come when vaccination coverage is high enough so that public health measures can be progressively lifted. The primary objective of COVID-19 vaccination is to reduce mortality and hospital pressure. A second goal is to reduce disease in all vulnerable groups, followed by a reopening of society. Ultimately, the possibility of elimination shall be assessed. The framework proposed by ECDC centres on the concept of an '*R budget*', evaluating the extent to which each country could afford to lighten response measures without seeing an unacceptable increase in COVID-19 incidence and mortality over the coming weeks. An estimate of the effectiveness of different classes of response measures will also be provided, allowing Member States to prioritise the lightening of measures that are of most importance to them. The framework also enables Member States to assess the impact of strengthening measures when necessary. Vaccination coverage is included in light of the anticipated decrease in mortality even as transmission continues and since, in time, high coverage will allow social contact to increase. The longer-term goal is to provide the framework in an interactive format, enabling MS to explore the impact of different policy options

Experts discussed opportunities and challenges related to the use of such a framework at EU level, such as the different effectiveness sometimes observed for the same measures across

countries, the changes in compliance and effectiveness over time or the importance of a fine granularity to factor in local contextual factors. It would be important to consider objective measures and indicators, throughout the natural progression of the disease, from behaviours (e.g. mobility data) to infection, hospital admission, ICU occupancy and ultimately deaths. Several countries have such a framework in place to assist decision-making and shared their experience with modelling at national level. Professor Piot invited those countries to share further information on their national frameworks and plans for easing mandates with the Commission and ECDC.

2. COVID-19 vaccination – State of play

DG SANTE presented the situation in terms of procurement and supply of vaccines. Lack of predictability in deliveries by some manufacturers has caused issues for planning and logistics. Deliveries are now steady from most producers and volumes should increase significantly in the second quarter. The arrival of a one-dose vaccine by Johnson and Johnson should also contribute to accelerating vaccination roll out. Discussions on possible additional contracts are ongoing with two additional companies.

EMA updated on the evaluation of the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, which could receive an opinion from the Agency next week, less than a month after the submission of the application. Deliveries should start the following month. Post authorisation work is ongoing to evaluate additional production sites to further improve production capacity. A rolling review is ongoing for the vaccines developed by Curevac and Novavax, as well as for the Sputnik V vaccine. EMA published guidance for vaccine manufacturers on how to streamline the process to adapt vaccines to variants if and when needed. Additional activities are ongoing on formulation, e.g. for Comirnaty, which would simplify the logistics and storage conditions.

Following a presentation by one member of the platform, experts shared their experience with their national vaccination programmes. Many countries observe an impact of vaccination on mortality, especially among elderly and people in nursing homes. Similar observations are made among healthcare workers. Responding to questions on dose intervals, EMA stated that the information from the Summaries of Product Characteristics remain valid and there is currently insufficient evidence to change the status quo.

3. AOB

Prof. Piot encouraged participants to fill in the survey on the functioning of the platform. Results will be discussed in an upcoming meeting.

Commissioner Kyriakides informed participants about an exceptional meeting scheduled on 11/3 at 17:00 as the Commission will make a proposal on 17/3 for a COVID-19 digital green certificate. Another topic to be discussed will be the use of self-tests.

Participation

Platform participants:

1. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
2. Dr. Angel KUNCHEV (Bulgaria)
3. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
4. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
5. Marika MADAROVA (Czechia)
6. Dr Helene Bilsted PROBST (Denmark)
7. Professor Irja LUTSAR (Estonia)
8. Professor Taneli PUUMALAINEN (Finland)
9. Professor Arnaud FONTANET (France)
10. Dr. Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
11. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
12. Eibhlin Connolly (Ireland)
13. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
14. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
15. Dr Jean-Claude Schmit (Luxembourg)
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)
- Prof. Peter PIOT, Special Advisor to the President of the European Commission
- Director General Sandra Gallina, DG SANTE
- Ms Julia SPENCER, Policy Advisor to Prof. Piot
- Roberto REIG RODRIGO, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Stalo PAPANASTASIOU, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Deputy Director General Pierre DELSAUX, DG SANTE
- 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

ECDC

- Dr Andrea AMMON, Director
- Helen JOHNSON, infectious disease modeller

EMA

- Ms Emer COOKE, Executive Director
- Marco CAVALLERI, Head of the office Anti-infectives and Vaccines
- Catherine COHET, Coordinator - Vaccine Monitoring Platform