

Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Tuesday 17/05/2022 at 15:00

1. Ukraine – current health challenges and EU action

Commissioner Kyriakides updated the participants on the health situation and challenges in Ukraine. She reiterated the Commission's commitment to provide support to refugees and Member States and informed that 335 patients have been successfully transferred so far, with no unmet requests pending. She shared that the Commission has launched a helpline in Ukrainian and Russian to provide information to refugees. Moreover, she informed the participants that over 1.5 million refugees have returned to Ukraine.

ECDC provided the latest epidemiological information, based on regular meetings held with the neighbouring countries. Registered refugees are actively integrated and entering the employment and education systems, and no major infectious disease outbreaks were reported. ECDC continues to produce technical guidance for Member States, translating the material in Ukrainian and local languages ([link](#)). They shared that, since May 16, the European vaccination information portal is also available in Ukrainian.

Participants from neighbouring countries updated on the situation in their country. The situation is changing from an acute phase to a medium and long-term condition in responding to the stable inflow of refugees. The importance of long-term solidarity mechanisms was raised to support Member States in responding to situations characterised by overlapping or parallel crisis, such as the Russian's invasion in Ukraine and the pandemic. Peter Piot highlighted that HERA was created as an important building block for such sustained responses to crises in view of the interplay of climate change, geopolitical conflicts, (re-)emerging pathogens and other current health-related challenges.

EMA informed that work is focusing on potential shortages of medicines, in close cooperation with Member States, DG SANTE and HERA. They stressed that solutions can be found for those Member States faced with obstacles in providing care to refugees due to different treatment regimens.

2. COVID-19 Epidemiological situation and update on vaccines and therapeutics

ECDC updated on the current epidemiological situation in EU/EEA, with notification rates remaining high in spite of downward trends in almost all EU countries. They stressed the need to closely monitor developments in the 65 years and older age group, as it reached 50% of the pandemic maximum for the EU/EEA and is rising in some countries.

Hospitalisations and mortality are generally decreasing in the majority of EU countries. The B1.4 and BA.5 Omicron sub-lineages have been classified as variants of concerns.

In the field of vaccines, EMA informed that work is advancing to secure new vaccines, noting that manufacturers are taking different approaches to their development and will share information at different times. They updated on the expected timelines for the possible approval of adapted vaccines and for the vaccine candidates of the companies Valneva, Sanofi and HIPRA. EMA stressed that the main challenge remains to effectively anticipate the autumn scenario. EMA is also engaging in discussions with international organisations and authorities to ensure regulatory coordination. On therapeutics, EMA informed that Olumiant (baricitinib), approved by the FDA, is currently being reviewed.

Commissioner Kyriakides expressed concerns about the share of the population that has not completed the vaccination cycle and about the plateauing in boosters' uptake. She stressed that communication about the need to complete vaccinations and about potential upcoming scenarios of the pandemic need to be strengthened, reiterating that the pandemic is not over yet. Member States and the ECDC echoed this point. The latter stressed how effective communication on vaccination campaigns will be central to ensure preparedness for autumn as well as in the long run. Calls were also made for greater efforts to strengthen fact-checking and to counter mis- and disinformation.

3. AOBs – Hepatitis of unknown origin and monkey pox

On hepatitis, ECDC informed that new cases are increasing worldwide at a slow but steady pace, with the virus affecting mostly healthy children younger than 5 years. At present, the most accredited hypothesis among experts is that the cases are triggered by a hepatitis infection combined with another factor. Further investigation is needed to confirm or reject this theory. ECDC informed that no link nor travel association amongst cases has been found so far. Participants updated on the epidemiological situation in their countries, sharing feedback from dedicated meetings on hepatitis taking place in the paediatric community.

On monkey pox, ECDC informed about a growing number of cases of monkeypox reported by EU Member States and third countries. Recent cases have no relation to a travel-related case from Nigeria that was previously reported on 7 May 2022 in the UK. The majority of cases have been in young men, many self-identifying as men who have sex with men (MSM), and none with recent travel history to areas where the disease is endemic. No deaths have been reported so far. It was underlined that the monkeypox virus is considered to have moderate transmissibility among humans and transmission requires close contact.

4. Conclusions and suggestions for future agenda points

The next meeting will take place virtually on 7 June at 1600 hours. A physical meeting will take place in Brussels on 23 June. As possible agenda point, participants suggested to focus on how to strengthen coordinated action and communication for vaccination campaigns towards different target groups.

Participation

Member States participants:

1. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
2. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
3. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
4. Professor Toivo MAIMETS (Estonia)
5. Dr Miklós Szocska (Hungary)
6. Dr Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
7. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
8. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
9. Professor Diana PAUN (Romania)
10. Professor Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)
11. Professor Fernando Simón (Spain)

European Commission:

12. Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner (Chair)
13. Professor Peter Piot, Special Advisor to EU Commission President
14. John F. Ryan, Acting Deputy Director General, DG SANTE
15. Giorgos Rossides, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
16. Maria Luisa Llano Cardenal, Cabinet Expert, Vice-President Schinas
17. Roberto Reig Rodrigo, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
18. Panayiotis Pourgourides, Cabinet Expert, Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
19. Daphne Von Buxhoeveden, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
20. Tove Ernst, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
21. Emiliou Emiliou, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
22. Cristina Modoran, Policy Assistant to the Director General, DG SANTE
23. Sigrid Weiland, Policy Officer, Strategy and Coordination Unit, DG SANTE
24. Wolfgang Philipp, Acting Director, HERA
25. Clement Williamson, Policy Assistant to the Director General, HERA
26. Georgios Pepios, Trainee – Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
27. Sara Bertucci, Trainee – Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides

ECDC:

28. Karl Ekdahl, Head of Disease Programmes
29. Antonis Lanaras, Head of Section European and International Cooperation

EMA:

30. Emer Cooke, Executive Director
31. Marco Cavaleri, Head of the office Anti-infectives and Vaccines
32. Zigmar Sebris, Strategic Support and Crisis Coordination Officer