

European Commission’s advisory panel on COVID-19

Report – audioconference Wednesday 18/03/2020 at 18:00

The President outlined the current situation in the EU and thanked the Panel for their contribution on the preparation of the recommendations on community measures and testing strategies.

Commissioner Kyriakides explained that the recommendations on community were presented today to the Health Ministers and tomorrow the ones on testing strategies would be discussed. The two documents have been very well received by Member States although some stressed the importance of leaving room for manoeuvre to adapt measures to the national context. Finally, the need to start working on criteria to eventually lift the measures was raised.

The President referred to the Commission’s guidelines on border measures as well as the proposal for a temporary restriction on non-essential travel into the EU. She also reported on contacts with the CureVac company.

The discussion moved to the agreed agenda:

1. Management of pressure on healthcare systems: what measures beyond social distancing?

The Panel explained that early and constant monitoring of Intensive Care Units must be a priority. Early and continuous mapping of capacity at national and regional level is essential to anticipate and plan for future burden. Strategies to free resources were discussed such as cancelling elective surgery, emergency numbers and the use of telemedicine (consultations). In addition, apps can be a good tool to provide information and first advice to patients and medical staff without going to the hospital and avoiding long waiting times at the hospital or on emergency telephone lines. Smartly using available resources (qualified nurses and medical students) and early training (also using online tools) is essential to strengthen healthcare capacity. Finally, as previously discussed, it is important to design support schemes for healthcare workers (e.g. specific taxi service, reallocation to hotels close to hospitals, daycare services, etc.).

As healthcare workers are exposed daily to COVID-19 patients, it is important to have specific testing protocols (e.g. morning testing and results in the same evening) and agreed rules on when to allow health workers back to work after quarantine or cure.

The Panel raised the importance of joined-up trials at EU level. It is crucial to avoid fragmentation (which would lead to non-completion of trials, as in China). The EU should play a role in federating efforts in this area. A short discussion took place on promising leads for treatment, a specific discussion will be organised at the next meeting of the Panel. Commissioner Kyriakides mentioned ongoing work on guidance for clinical trials facilitation.

The President recalled the importance of taking community measures but also stressed their impact on society and the economy. A package of measures has been taken to counteract the negative effects on the economy.

2. Migrant and refugee populations in the EU

The Panel discussed the issue of refugee hotspots and their structural weaknesses to face potential contagion. The experience from past pandemics and epidemics would be a useful basis to assess what measures could be taken.

In particular, the need for information on the age profile and health status of refugees was deemed as important to gauge (through modelling) the potential effects of COVID-19.

The Panel stressed the importance of NGOs in fighting epidemics in the past and how they could be key players in this respect.

3. Any other business

The Panel stressed the importance of defining criteria to gradually lift the social distance measures taken. EU guidance on this topic would be very welcome and will help in having harmonised exit strategies. It is important that the forthcoming recommendations take into account the different stages of the epidemic in the EU Member States. It was suggested to organise a (virtual) meeting between modelling experts and the European Commission to exchange knowledge.

A short discussion on the concept of population immunity took place. The term as such comes from the vaccine field and is defined as a level of immunity in the population that would protect the rest that is not immune. It is important to consider the gradual development of population immunity as part of a package of measures that help mitigate the epidemic. At this stage, it is difficult to assess its potential impact, as the full extent of circulation of the virus is not known, in different groups (for example children). In addition, immunity dynamics (e.g. development of responses with mild disease, duration of immunity) remain to be determined. Even after the measures are lifted, the virus could continue to be present in the lives of EU citizens, as many other viruses are. Increasing levels of population immunity will help in curbing its effects but strong surveillance and readiness to take measures again will be essential in the medium term. Experience with previous influenza epidemics would argue against a full barrier effect of population immunity. A key question is what kind of level of infection is society willing to accept?

Possible topics for forthcoming meetings:

- Criteria for exit strategy from community measures
- Research and development agenda

Follow-up:

- Next phone conference on Sunday 22/03/2020 at 18:00
- Meeting to be organised between Panel, modelling experts, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the Joint Research Centre (in support of developing exit strategies from community measures)
- Share with the Panel an overview of R&D efforts on COVID-19

Participants in the audioconference:

- European Commission: President von der Leyen, Commissioner Kyriakides, I. Juhansone, K. Vandenberghe, R. Reig Rodrigo
- Peter Piot (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine)
- Marion Koopman (Erasmus MC)
- Arnaud Fontenet (Institut Pasteur)
- Christian Drosten (Charité)
- Lothar Wieler (Robert Koch Institute)
- Maria Capobianchi (National Institute of Infectious Diseases, Rome)
- Kåre Mølbak (Statens Serum Institute, Copenhagen)

Observer:

- Andrea Ammon (ECDC Director)