Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19

Meeting Report

Thursday 26/03/2021 at 15:00

1. COVID-19 Epidemiological update

ECDC provided an update on the epidemiological situation across the EU. Case numbers have been increasing for four weeks. The range of 14-day case notification rates across the EU is very broad, from 15 to 1500 cases per 100,000 inhabitants. Hospital and/or ICU occupancy and/or new admissions due to COVID-19 increased compared with the previous week in 27 countries. Death notification rates remain stable. The absolute values of the indicators remain high, suggesting that transmission is still widespread.

The B.1.1.7 variant of concern is now the dominant strain in the EU. The B.1.351 and the P.1 strains are also increasingly reported, although mostly sporadically in the case of P.1. ECDC provides updates on the circulation of variants of concern under section 3.7 of its weekly country report (https://covid19-country-overviews.ecdc.europa.eu/).

Vaccination campaigns are going forward in all Member States. Over 60 million doses have now been administered, according to data published in the ECDC vaccine tracker (https://vaccinetracker.ecdc.europa.eu/public/extensions/COVID-19/vaccine-tracker.html).

Experts provided updates on the situation in their country, notably regarding the presence of variants. The Belgian representative informed about a new variant of interest: B1.214, for which there is currently no indication of immunity escape, higher transmissibility, nor higher severity.

2. COVID-19 vaccination – State of play

EMA provided a state of play on the four vaccines currently authorised at EU level: BioNTech/Pfizer, Astrazeneca, Moderna and Janssen. The first deliveries of the Janssen vaccine are expected in April.

Three vaccines are currently under rolling review: Curevac, Novavax, Sputnik. No additional authorisation is expected before June.

EMA continues to inform the general public. The third public stakeholder meeting took place on 26/3 and was well-attended https://www.ema.europa.eu/en/events/public-stakeholder-meeting-approval-safety-monitoring-impact-covid-19-vaccines-eu.

EMA also informed about ongoing post marketing authorisation activities. New manufacturing sites are being authorised, in Marburg (DE) for Pfizer/BioNTech, in Halix (NL) for Astrazeneca, and in Lonza (IT) for Moderna. Work is also ongoing to allow more flexible

storage conditions and new packaging. Supply issues experienced in the first quarter should resorb over time. It will therefore be important to ensure that all available doses can be administered timely.

Pharmacovigilance continues on a continuous basis for all vaccines. The assessment of EMA remains that the benefits of the Astrazeneca vaccine outweigh any possible risks. Work continues to look into a small cluster of very rare adverse events to explore further any possible causal links and risk factors.

3. How to communicate pharmacovigilance results in a coordinated and coherent way?

Experts held an exchange of views on the challenges in communicating pharmacovigilance signals and on risk communication in general. Recent polls show a decreased level of trust in the Astrazeneca vaccine over the last three weeks.

The Commission presented and experts discussed key factors deemed critical to preserve and restore trust, including:

- transparency as a fundamental guiding principle;
- pedagogy, to explain clearly complex notions
- the need to avoid politicising the debate about vaccination
- anchoring arguments in scientific evidence
- explaining the process for vaccine approval and pharmacovigilance systems (for which the Commission has developed material available in all EU languages)
- making a clear distinction between supply issues and the vaccines themselves
- adapting the format of messages and medium to audiences (e.g. use social media for live chats with experts to debunk myths)
- rely on trusted messengers to convey important messages (e.g. health professionals, notably General Practitioners, with proximity being an important factor that can influence the level of trust).

4. Results of the questionnaire and discussion

Prof. Piot presented the results of a survey conducted among platform members on the functioning of the scientific advice platform. The feedback from members is overall positive in terms of both the content and format of the discussions. Platform meetings are deemed helpful to understand the challenges faced by different Member States and to help identify useful action at EU level. The platform is also considered as an important group to bridge possible gaps between experts, administrations and politicians.

Various suggestions were made to make an even greater use of the scientific knowledge of the platform, such as the possibility of inviting international experts or having platform members giving presentations on specific topics. Regular meetings of the platform could also be complemented by an electronic platform to share additional information in between meetings.

5. Conclusions and suggestions for future agenda points

The question of recommendations to be followed by fully vaccinated individuals in terms of non-pharmaceutical interventions will be put on the agenda of an upcoming meeting. The US CDC has provided interim recommendations on the topic (link). The ECDC will publish on 29/3 the currently available evidence on transmission by vaccinated or previously infected people. On 9 April, ECDC will publish guidance on measures to be followed by vaccinated people.

6. AOB

The next call is scheduled for 15 April 2021 at 1700 hours

Participation

Platform participants:

1. Professor Markus MULLER (Austria)
2. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
3. Dr. Angel KUNCHEV (Bulgaria)
4. Professor Alemka MARKOTIC (Croatia)
5. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
6. Marika MADAROVA (Czechia)
7. Professor Irja LUTSAR (Estonia)
8. Dr. Hans-Ulrich HOLTHERM (Germany)
9. Dr. Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
10. Mr Miklós SZOCSKA (Hungary)
11. Ms Eibhlin CONNOLLY (Ireland)
12. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
13. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
14. Dr Charles Mallia Azzopardi (Malta)
15. Dr Aura Timen (The Netherlands)
16. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
17. Professor Henrique DE BARROS (Portugal)
18. Professor Diana Loreta PAUN (Romania)
19. Mr Milan KREK (Slovenia)
20. Dr Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

European Commission:

- Commissioner Stella KYRIAKIDES (Chair)
- Giorgos ROSSIDES, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Prof. Peter PIOT, Special Advisor to the President of the European Commission
- Ms Julia SPENCER, Policy Advisor to Prof. Piot
- Sandra GALLINA, Director General, DG SANTE
- Pierre DELSAUX, Deputy Director General, DG SANTE
- Kurt VANDENBERGHE, Member of Cabinet, President's Office
- Dana SPINANT, European Commission Deputy Chief Spokesperson
- Roberto REIG RODRIGO, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
- Tove ERNST, Member of Cabinet/Communication Advisor of Commissioner Kyriakides
- 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
- Roser DOMENECH AMADO, Head of Communications Unit, DG SANTE

- Nicolas PRADALIE, Secretariat General

ECDC

- Dr Andrea AMMON, Director

EMA

- Emer COOKE, Executive Director
- Marco CAVALLERI, Head of the office Anti-infectives and Vaccines