Meeting of the EU scientific advice platform on COVID-19 – Report

Thursday 30/06/2022 at 16:00 CET

1. COVID-19 – Epidemiological, vaccination and therapeutics update

Commissioner Kyriakides reiterated the importance of strong and cohesive communication regarding COVID-19 and vaccines, especially in view of the growing number of cases caused by the circulation of the BA4 and BA5 Omicron sub variants.

ECDC updated on the current epidemiological situation in EU/EEA, with case notification rates continuing to increase overall, including in the population group above 65 years in several EU countries. An increase in some severity indicators has also been reported, with growing hospitalisation and ICU occupancy rates as compared to the previous weeks in 15 out of 28 countries with data on hospital or ICU admissions/ occupancy. Mortality is overall decreasing in all but four EU countries. In terms of distribution of variants, data from countries with adequate sequencing volume show that the proportion of new cases attributable to the circulation of the BA5 sub variant continues to increase, with the variant being currently dominant in 12 EU countries. Stable trends in hospitalization and increasing trends in case notification rates and mortality are forecast for the EU/ EEA up to 17 July. However, forecasts should be approached with caution due to changes in testing criteria and reporting procedures. Last, ECDC informed that vaccination rates plateaued.

In the field of vaccines, EMA reiterated that, at present, approved vaccines continue to be recommended as they protect from severe illness and hospitalisation, and advised to keep prioritising the elderly and vulnerable groups in vaccination campaigns. The Agency also briefed participants on ongoing discussions with international medicines regulators regarding the potential authorisation of variant adapted vaccines. Furthermore, EMA informed that clinical data are currently being evaluated for omicron BA1-adapted vaccines, whereas data for vaccines adapted to the most recent sub-variants are still at preliminary stage (immunogenicity tests). In particular, the Agency highlighted that efforts in vaccine development and supply should not be focused on developing products that are an exact match for the latest variants, but rather on consistently monitoring the efficacy of approved vaccines against BA4 and BA5, so as to be ready in case a substantial adaptation of the products is needed. This is why EMA is reviewing emerging data on new products – to determine their comparative advantages vis-à-vis approved vaccines.

Pierre Delsaux, Director-General of HERA, informed participants that Pfizer and Moderna will stop delivering current vaccines to Member States as of 1st of July due to sufficient stockpiling and, if authorised by regulators, will start delivering BA1-adapted vaccines after summer.

Participants exchanged on emerging real-life data on vaccine effectiveness, and on the potential next steps, in particular on the timing for setting up vaccination campaigns for autumn. Experts from Belgium, Spain, Sweden, Italy, Cyprus and Greece stressed the importance of timely vaccination, beyond the vaccine composition. Experts from Belgium, Spain and Italy informed that data from the three countries show that protection against severe illness and hospitalisation remains high and stable with currently approved vaccines. Sweden underscored the importance of vaccines' availability, supported by Professor Piot, who additionally highlighted the importance of Member States' readiness to administer vaccines as needed.

Experts from Sweden, Spain, Italy, Cyprus, Croatia and Greece echoed Commissioner Kyriakides in calling for a cohesive European approach to the next vaccination campaign, to be based on sound scientific evidence. Sandra Gallina, Director-General of DG SANTE, supported the importance of strong communication, calling in particular for a European approach to the re-instatement of some non-medical public health measures.

On clinical trials, Ms Gallina recalled that last year the European Commission adopted a legal change to speed up the authorisation of COVID-19 vaccines adapted to new variants. It includes provisions in the relevant EU legislation (Variation Regulation) to allow companies to focus on gathering the necessary evidence in time and to enable authorisation with a focused set of additional data submitted to the EMA. Based on positive results in Greece, Professor Tsiodras invited other experts to share their experience with protease inhibitors. Professor Piot stressed the need to address remaining bottlenecks in organising multi-country trials – a reality that is affecting the response to COVID-19 and other public health issues, such as monkeypox. Cyprus called for collecting clinical data on comparative effectiveness and safety of vaccines.

2. Conclusions and suggestions for future agenda points

The next meeting will take place on 18 July at 16:00. The meeting will focus on an update on the evolving COVID-19 situation and on a coordinated approach to vaccination campaigns, countries' readiness and communication.

Participation

Member States participants:

1. Professor Steven VAN GUCHT (Belgium)
2. Professor Alemka MARKOTIĆ (Croatia)
3. Dr Zoe PANA (Cyprus)
4. Professor Toivo MAIMETS (Estonia)
5. Dr Veronique HEON-KLIN (Germany)
6. Professor Sotiris TSIODRAS (Greece)
7. Professor Miklós SZÓCSKA (Hungary)
8. Professor Silvio BRUSAFERRO (Italy)
9. Professor Uga DUMPIS (Latvia)
10. Dr Charles MALLIA-AZZOPARDI (Malta)
11. Professor Andrzej HORBAN (Poland)
12. Professor Henrique BARROS (Portugal)
13. Professor Diana PAUN (Romania)
14. Mr Milan Krek (Slovenia)
15. Professor Fernando SIMÓN (Spain)
16. Professor Anders TEGNELL (Sweden)

European Commission:

17. Stella Kyriakides, European Commissioner (Chair)
18. Professor Peter Piot, Special Advisor to EU Commission President
19. Sandra Gallina, Director General, DG SANTE
20. Pierre Delsaux, Director General, HERA
21. Giorgos Rossides, Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
22. Roberto Reig Rodrigo, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
23. Panayiotis Pourgourides, Cabinet Expert, Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
24. Karolina Herbout-Borczak, Member of Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
25. Thomas Van Cangh, Policy Assistant to the Director General, DG SANTE
26. Anne Auffret, Policy Assistant to Director General, HERA
27. Sigrid Weiland, Policy Officer – Strategy and Coordination Unit, DG SANTE
28. Nicolas Pradalie, Secretariat General
29. Georgios Pepios, Trainee – Cabinet of Commissioner Kyriakides
30. Sara Bertucci, Trainee – Strategy and Coordination Unit, DG SANTE

ECDC:

31. Karl Ekdhal
32. Antonis Lanaras

EMA:

33. Emer Cooke – Executive Director
34. Marco Cavaleri, Head of the office Anti-infectives and Vaccines