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DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY

Public health, country knowledge, crisis management
Health Security and Vaccination

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Health Security Committee

Audio meeting on the outbreak of COVID-19

Draft Summary Report

Chair: European Commission, DG SANTE - John Ryan (point 1), Wolfgang Philipp (point 2)

Audio participants: AT, BE, BG, CY, CZ, DE, DK, EE, EL, ES, FI, FR, HU, IE, IT, LT, LU, LV, MT, NL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK, IS, NO, CH, UK, AL, ME, RS, XK, MD, DG SANTE, DG CNECT, DG ECHO, DG HR, EMA, ECDC, Council, WHO, DG SANTE Adviser for Crisis Management in Food Animals and Plants

Key Conclusions

1. Visit of the Grand Duke of Luxembourg and Minister for Health Lenert

The Chair, John F. Ryan, Director Public Health, DG SANTE European Commission, opened the web meeting introducing *His Royal Highness Grand Duke Henri of Luxembourg* and inviting him to address the members of the Health Security Committee.

- Welcome address – *His Royal Highness Grand Duke Henri of Luxembourg*

HRH expressed pride over the Health Security Committee being located in Luxembourg and sincere appreciation for the efforts of the HSC, recognising its importance for the protection of all citizens in the EU. HRH recalled the work of HSC during the Ebola and Zika crisis and the important role in coordinating the exchange of information and policies amongst the Member States, stating that this role should be further strengthened. Referring to the COVID-19 crisis, HRH acknowledged the nature of the interconnected world as a result of globalisation and the interface between animal life and human beings and stressed the importance of prevention and the “One Health” approach. HRH expressed hope for an effective vaccine to be ready soon and mentioned the pivotal role of the EU in supporting Member States. HRH mentioned the economic impact of the health crisis, many people are suffering and it is important to strike a balance between the economy and the containment of the pandemic. HRH concluded by thanking the HSC for their work, noting the importance of information exchange amongst Member States and the HSC as an example of union against the pandemic.

The Chair gave the floor to the Minister of Health of Luxembourg, Paulette Lenert

- COVID-19 testing strategy in Luxembourg – *Paulette Lenert, Minister of Health Luxembourg*

The Ministry of Health welcomed the work of the HSC members and DG SANTE team and their relentless efforts since the beginning of this unprecedented sanitary crisis, noting that the HSC enabled member states to exchange best practices and most valuable information on how to best deal with COVID-19. The exchange of information during crisis is vital to decision makers at all levels. For this reason, LU is very honored to host DG SANTE and the HSC. The MoH gave an overview of LU measures, including wide-spread testing and particularly the testing of asymptomatic people and of healthcare workers and critical sectors, adding that since the beginning of the crisis the government has made substantial investments in the purchasing and deployment of testing material. MoH observed that testing is not only a mean to identify positive people and clusters, but also a mean to break infections chains quickly and to get a good overview of the spreading of the virus. MoH informed that participation in testing is voluntary and free of charge and noted with satisfaction that today LU ranks amongst the highest testing rate countries. This has not been easy, this strategy triggered skepticism especially at the beginning because by testing a lot, more positive cases are identified and this has unfortunately contributed to the fact that LU was been put on the red list of many countries preventing citizens to travel. However today this strategy yields positive results along with tracing, isolating and other prevention measures. MoH emphasised the need for fast turn around times to communicate results which ranges between 24-48h in LU. MoH informed of the upcoming testing strategy, including use of rapid antigen tests. The current wave has put testing capacities under stress, as more and more people understand that they are part of the solution and this shows that LU national media campaign has proved to be efficient. LU has increased testing capacities with new testing stations. MoH concluded by reaffirming LU support to the HSC not only in this crisis but also in the future as more health crisis are to be expected. MoH noted that although Member States' health policies are very different it is indeed important to aim for common objectives every time the EU faces a health crisis which does not know borders. The Chair welcomed efforts of LU, particularly complimenting LU for the communication strategy, which includes information delivered in several languages.

The Chair gave the floor to the representatives of the HSC

- Update from the HSC members on the testing strategies in their countries

DE expressed interest in learning more about both the updated LU testing and communication strategy. DE acknowledged that EU countries are interconnected, particularly between DE and LU there are many cross-border workers. ES informed of their testing strategy and raised the issue of the testing reluctance amongst high-risk and vulnerable groups, particularly those working in the informal economy for which testing positive could result in losing the source of their income. IT showed interest in the experience of LU regarding tests, particularly new tools such as the rapid antigen tests. IT has started to use rapid antigen tests in certain settings, such as in schools and for international travelers and reported positive results. IT also welcomed an EU coordinated approach on rapid antigen tests (RATs) and joined ES on the issue of testing reluctance amongst vulnerable groups. The Chair informed that the Commission is working on a recommendation on the use of rapid antigen tests and highlighted the difficult work being performed by the healthcare workers, not only professionally but also personally. In this respect the importance of looking after health workers' mental health in a preventive manner. DG SANTE is planning a webinar with MSF and the Red Cross with a focus on how the NGOs sector in particular can help industries to reach vulnerable groups with the aim to bring together good practices. FR informed about preparations for large-scale deployment of RATs drawing on multiple resources for taking the test (including pharmacists).

LU MoH shared reflections on successful approaches, noting that wide-scale testing has been an important pillar of action. Economic elements have also been an important factor, with sickness pay being granted for people in quarantine and that business stakeholders have also been supportive in cooperating with measures. On reaching out to the most vulnerable, MoH mentioned strong

collaboration with NGOs, community based organizations. On successful factors contributing to the effectiveness of communication strategy of LU, MoH also highlighted the strong political will to have a robust testing strategy, the commitment and collaboration of the scientific community that added strong credibility to the strategy. Lessons learned from the previous phase were also taken into account.

In closing the session, the Chair expressed gratitude to HRH and MoH and to HSC for their contributions.

2. COVID-19 strain identified in minks and humans with mutations

The Chair gave a re-cap of the previously raised topic (HSC of 5 November 2020). On the 4th of November, Denmark informed through the EWRS of a new strain of the SARS-CoV-2 virus identified in minks farm in North Jutland.

Since June 2020, 214 human cases of COVID-19 have been identified in Denmark with SARS-CoV-2 variants associated with farmed minks. Out of these 214 cases 12 cases with a unique mutated variant, reported on 4 November. All 12 cases were identified already in September 2020 in North Jutland, Denmark. The cases ranged in age from 7 to 79 years, and eight had a link to the mink farming industry and four cases were from the local community. Initial observations suggest that the clinical presentation, severity and transmission among those infected are similar to that of other circulating SARS-CoV-2 viruses. However, this variant, referred to as the "cluster 5" variant, had a combination of mutations, or changes that have not been previously observed. The implications of the identified changes in this variant are not yet well understood.

Preliminary findings indicate that this particular mink-associated variant identified in both minks and the 12 human cases has moderately decreased sensitivity to neutralising antibodies. Unrelated changes in this region of the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 have also been identified in human cases and are being closely studied and monitored. For now, these mutations in humans and in mink are still very rare in humans. Further scientific and laboratory-based studies are required to verify preliminary findings reported and to understand any potential implications of this finding in terms of diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines in development.

In the meantime, The Danish government has ordered the culling of the nation's entire farmed mink herd to stop the spread of SARS-CoV-2. To date, six countries, namely Denmark, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, Italy and the United States of America have reported SARS-CoV-2 in farmed minks to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). After posting a notification on the EWRS on 4 November, we have seen that response measures such as travel restrictions have been implemented by Denmark and by some other countries, including UK and Ireland (e.g. travellers should self-isolate for 14 days from their arrival) which we would like to discuss further.

ECDC presented an overview of their rapid risk assessment (published 12 November). It states that the risk to human health by SARS-CoV2 variants related to mink is low and too little is known about the cluster 5 variant. It also states that the risk of cross-border spread of SARS-CoV-2 variants from mink through humans was moderate and the risk of spread through other animals and animal products was very low.

Options for action include enhanced human testing, sequencing and characterisation of antigenic properties and virus infectivity. Further targeted actions to be taken in mink farms and their immediately associated sectors are recommended and ongoing in DK. ECDC emphasised that enhanced infection prevention and control measures are important. This also includes animal testing and development of one-health preparedness and response strategies. DG SANTE has contacted vaccine manufacturers and waiting for their feedback.

DG SANTE Adviser for Crisis Management in Food, Animals and Plants informed of the latest development from the animal health perspective. A meeting of the Chief Veterinary Officers takes place 12 November with two major points; the attention that should be given COVID-19 in animals and methods to be used for notifying SARS-CoV-2 to World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

DK gave an overview of their national situation and public health challenges they have been facing. Since September there is no evidence of spread or wider outbreak from the mutated strain (cluster 5 mutation), hence it is suspected to have been contained. DK has heightened public health measures until there is more evidence that the mutated strain is not circulating in the community. Further virological studies are ongoing at WHO level. Countries were encouraged to enhance sequencing and strain analysis.

DE raised the issue of travel advice and asked countries about measures they have taken or are planning to take and information on the evidence base. UK has taken measures, banning travel of people from DK and they would come back with details of their measures in writing or at the next HSC. IE have existing measures that apply for travellers coming from DK on the basis of it being a red zone country (recommendations for 14-day quarantine) but these are not related to the specific mink concerns. NL do not consider additional measures beyond those existing (general recommendation to citizens not to travel). NL appreciated ECDC efforts on the risk assessment and look forward to receiving this. NL called for a joint one health approach by the EU on this matter. This approach should not be limited to mink, but should include research and, where necessary, possible actions regarding other animals bred for their fur (and could potentially be a reservoir) as well. Furthermore, NL expressed concerns over reservoir development in mink farms. For this reason, NL strongly believes that all contaminated mink farms must be cleared.

BE asked why COM has not recognised SARS CoV2 as an emerging animal disease at OIE level. DG SANTE explained that the decision was a collective decision on behalf of the EU, taken in the early days of the COVID-19 outbreak. The OIE emerging disease definition requires significant impact to human or animal health. The EU chose to inform in full transparency of all events related to COVID using a procedure different than the immediate notification. At the time of the decision there was no evidence of significant impact from animal to human transmission. If the DK strain is identified as causing significant harm to humans, the consideration of this disease as regards international notification procedures might be changed.

DK is working closely with international partners (WHO and ECDC) and informed that no new cases in humans have been identified since September. The DK risk assessment came to the conclusion that spread between mink and humans needs to be controlled, hence the decision to cull mink farms.

Follow-up

- ECDC, EFSA, EMA risk assessment to be published 12 Nov and circulated amongst HSC
- SANTE to update on potential feedback from vaccine manufacturers
- SANTE to feedback from the CVO meeting of 12 Nov
- UK will come back with details of their DK travel ban in writing or at the next HSC.
- Countries with mink farms to update on their national measures at next HSC or in writing
- DK to provide further information on scientific investigations on mink related SarS Cov-2 strains

Close.