



ECDC Advisory Forum

**Minutes of the Sixty-eighth meeting of the ECDC Advisory Forum
22 February 2022 (via videoconference)**

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Opening and adoption of the programme noting declarations of interest

1. Andrea Ammon, Director, ECDC, welcomed the participants to the 68th Advisory Forum meeting which was taking place via videoconference.
2. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, welcomed Adriana Pistol, the new AF member for Romania and Cristian Radu Cucuiu, the new AF alternate for Romania. Apologies had been received from John Middleton, ASPHER.
3. The draft programme was adopted and there were no conflicts of interest declared.
4. Under 'Any other business' ECDC proposed an item regarding a suggested change of date for the next Advisory Forum meeting.
5. It was pointed out that for the item 'Prioritisation of COVID-19 research proposals', participants would be invited to use 'Slido' for polling, however only the EU/EEA Member States would be eligible to vote.

Adoption of the draft minutes from the 67th Advisory Forum meeting

6. There were no requests for amendments to the draft minutes from the 67th Advisory Forum meeting held on 14 December 2021 and the minutes were adopted.

Update on COVID-19

7. Andrea Ammon, ECDC Director, said that although the pandemic was now moving into a new phase, it was unclear as yet whether this was an interim phase before a new wave or the beginning of the end. Preparing for next autumn/winter would involve different scenarios – either with the current variant or possibly even a new one, with different features including immune evasion. It was therefore important to be ready to deal with this situation, using the experience gained over the past two years. With regard to surveillance, changes were needed but when there was a discussion about this last September 2021, the consensus was that the timetable was too tight for this season. However, it was now possible to look at what could be done for the next season and during the meeting scenarios would be presented which could help with prediction and response in autumn/winter 2022.

8. ECDC had been offering support to 11 countries with below-average levels of COVID-19 vaccination coverage and had had some very helpful discussions with these countries, in order to better understand the situation and offer targeted support. Although each Member State was different, ECDC had been able to offer some web seminars to address common issues – in particular, misinformation and community engagement. Targeted support was adapted to the situation in the countries. For example, for Romania, a webinar had been arranged with GPs on the issue of vaccine hesitancy (in collaboration with the European Medicines Agency - EMA) and another for healthcare personnel going out to undertake vaccinations, and these had proven to be well-received. In addition, a media briefing had been arranged in Bulgaria (in collaboration with EMA) attended by 42 journalists. ECDC was planning further discussions as it was felt that this was a very useful way of engaging with countries to offer alternative types of support. This was also very relevant since, under ECDC's extended EU mandate, it was anticipated that an EU Health Task Force would be set up, that would make use of specific country knowledge.

Update on ECDC Scientific Outputs – review of 2021, forward look 2022

9. Howard Needham, Expert, Scientific Liaison, Scientific Methods and Standards Unit, ECDC, gave a short presentation and the floor was opened for discussion.
10. Marko Korenjak, European Liver Patients Association (ELPA) [Chat] asked whether ECDC had data on the impact of its scientific publications.

11. Howard Needham replied that many of ECDC's reports did not appear in scientific journals and therefore it was more difficult to track their impact or collate information on this. ECDC did have a citation index for its peer-reviewed publications for which such information was collected and collated on an annual basis and this could be made available. With regard to other website content, it was difficult to gauge its impact and there was no satisfactory solution to this issue (stakeholder surveys were one solution but still a work in progress).

12. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, reported that there had been 3 000 registrations for ESCAIDE in 2021 and well over 2 700 active participants during the live sessions of the conference. Discussions had also taken place both in the Management Board and the Advisory Forum on the importance of retaining ESCAIDE as a platform for sharing knowledge and advice. He pointed out that by arranging the conference online it had been possible to increase the number of participants considerably. He anticipated further discussion on this issue in the near future.

13. Frode Forland, AF Member, Norway, added that the impact of discussions at the AF and the reviewing of ECDC's scientific output regularly were considerable and it was very useful for public health institutes that were struggling to produce their own scientific output. He commended ECDC's work which had been very valuable and helpful in Norway for developing interventions and creating policies. Therefore, although it was difficult to quantify, he was convinced that ECDC was having an impact. The pandemic had shown that organisations needed to work across countries and on a global scale. The collaboration between ECDC, the Health Security Committee and the World Health Organization had been extremely important during the pandemic. In addition, ECDC having arranged more informal meetings and more regular discussions had also been very helpful and he suggested that approach might be developed further.

14. Osamah Hamouda, AF Member, Germany, agreed with the AF Member for Norway, and added that it was also hard to measure the impact of work at national level. At the Robert Koch Institute, there had been suggestions that it might be possible to organise a poll or something similar – and he proposed that ECDC could look at how to do something similar at European level.

15. Maarit Kokki, Head of Executive Office, ECDC, mentioned that a stakeholder survey was being planned for 2022, along with interviews and focus groups. Referring to the comment by the German AF Member, she added that a Eurobarometer-type of poll could indeed be useful.

16. Marko Korenjak (ELPA) asked whether ECDC had any data on impact of its scientific publications. He also congratulated ECDC's Director on her interactions with the mass media during the pandemic and suggested that in the coming years it would be good to try and replicate that. He could not offer any solutions on how to improve impact assessment but pointed out that the information contained in ECDC's documents probably had an impact in many different ways, not just in terms of the citation index.

17. Howard Needham, Expert, Scientific Liaison, Scientific Methods and Standards Unit, ECDC (in Chat), reported information prepared by the ECDC Library team summarising the 2021 citation index for ECDC-authored peer review publications:

- The five-year impact factor (citations in 2021 to ECDC-authored publications produced between 2016–2020) ÷ number of ECDC authored publications (2016–2020) = 11.30
- The average number of citations received for each ECDC peer-reviewed publications (2005–2021) = 46.88.

18. Both showed a significant upward trend in comparison with previous years (i.e. ECDC-authored peer review outputs were being cited with increasing frequency.)

Prioritisation of COVID-19 research proposals

19. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, explained that three slides would be presented, each containing a list of priorities, and he asked those AF Members and Alternates representing EU/EEA Member States to indicate their opinion on the highest priorities using the Slido polling tool.

20. Howard Needham, Expert, Scientific Liaison, Scientific Methods and Standards Unit, presented a list of 22 high-level COVID knowledge gaps that had been identified during group interviews with ECDC experts. These were divided into three thematic areas, and each AF Member representing EU/EEA Member States was asked to identify the three highest priority areas for research action in each thematic area. The AF members were invited to base their decision on IRIS criteria, and also take into account the research action that would be most relevant in informing future public health policy given the current trajectory of the pandemic.

21. The results (indicating the two most popular in each case) were for proposals related to "Biology and the intersection with human host populations" - Immunity and immune response (93% in favour) and Characterising the disease burden (80%); for proposals related to "Pandemic response" - Systematic evaluation of prevention and control measures (80%) and Evaluation of public health and economic cost of COVID-19 (67%); and for proposals related to "Pandemic (re-)emergence and new variants" - Research into novel surveillance and monitoring strategies and (88%) and Optimising responses to prevent and mitigate a new pandemic (69%).
22. Mike Catchpole noted that in each case, the top two slides were identified by at least 2/3 of participants.
23. Frode Forland, AF Member, Norway, said that this had been a useful exercise although he felt that there was a certain overlap between some of the questions. He believed that more research was needed on non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) specifically, involving synchronised testing among the countries which ECDC could help to coordinate. The second important area for research involved the burden and cost of such interventions, in terms of psychological health, cost to society, etc. Although it was possible that this was captured in one of the slides, he emphasised the need for more work in this area.
24. Lorraine Doherty, AF Member, Ireland, said that the exercise had been very useful. She was surprised to see medically vulnerable populations scoring quite low in the prioritisation since these populations had challenged public health experts throughout the pandemic and it was important to understand how to better support them. She agreed that NPIs was an important area, adding that countries needed to obtain a better picture of their effectiveness. If such measures were to be implemented again in the future it would be necessary to have more evidence to support their reintroduction, given the high level of pandemic fatigue currently evident in the population in Ireland.
25. Rebecca Moore, European Institute of Women's Health, agreed with the AF Member for Ireland and felt that the perspective of the medically vulnerable was lacking and should perhaps be discussed in more detail. It was also important to develop an evidence base for NPIs, as there was a great deal of misinformation on this issue and public health institutions would have to deal with this. The issue of air quality was also very important as were health economic measures. She found it interesting that the subject of immunity was considered to be the most important aspect to study and suggested that it might be useful to collaborate with vaccine developers on this issue because this was also in their interests.
26. Howard Needham, Expert, Scientific Liaison, Scientific Methods and Standards Unit, ECDC, thanked the AF Members for their input and for participating in the poll.

Latest update on COVID-19 and influenza vaccine effectiveness multi-country studies

27. Sabrina Bacci, Principal Expert Vaccine-Preventable Diseases, Disease Programmes Unit, ECDC, gave a short presentation.
28. Isabel De La Fuente Garcia, AF Member, Luxembourg (Chat) asked whether ECDC was including different age groups for vaccine effectiveness and including children, and also whether they were looking at influenza and COVID-19.
29. Sabrina Bacci replied that around 12 months ago it had been difficult to find people who were eligible to participate in the study, however now one year later during the second phase of the pandemic where vaccination was available to the whole population, the platform would be very important. At the moment there were only a few countries in the system that had access to children's hospitals, but this would probably change. For the most recent analysis on 14 February 2022, there had been too few individuals with severe disease under the age of 30 years, however they were keeping this in mind and also vaccine effectiveness in relation to primary care. With regard to influenza and COVID-19, many countries had been providing specific data on COVID-19 vaccination but this was available to the same extent for influenza.

Long-term scenarios for the COVID-19 pandemic – Considerations for transitioning beyond the acute pandemic phase

30. Jonathan Suk, Principal Expert Emergency Preparedness and Response, Public Health Functions Unit, ECDC, gave a short presentation and finished by asking what the AF's expectations were for the autumn

2022/2023, what level of preparedness would be required, and how ECDC could provide support for national efforts.

31. Osamah Hamouda, AF Member, Germany, said that the scenarios presented were broad enough to cover what might happen. As had been seen in 2021, after the summer travel season there was an increase in incidence everywhere as autumn approached and it was possible that this could happen again, although it was impossible to know whether such an upsurge would remain manageable. In Germany they were experiencing quite strong political pressure as the politicians had been keen to open everything up as quickly as possible. It was also difficult to know what might happen if NPIs were reinstated in the autumn in terms of acceptance by the population. Similarly, there was the question of virus variants and whether any new variants would emerge in the interim.

32. Ana Correia, AF Alternate, Portugal (in Chat), thanked ECD for the scenarios which would be very useful for them as they were currently discussing the transition phase.

33. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC, confirmed that the wish to support decision-makers and politicians was one of the reasons for doing scenarios work – using the knowledge gained to date by public health experts on the virus' ability to mutate and transform along with scenarios would help political colleagues to take decisions.

34. Lorraine Doherty, AF Member, Ireland, said the expectations for autumn/winter 2022 in Ireland were that COVID-19 would still be in circulation, along with influenza which was increasing in prevalence as people returned to their normal lives and started mixing socially. She believed it was important to look at how to enhance surveillance and preparedness. In Ireland they were already looking at how to expand seroprevalence studies and enhance sentinel surveillance across primary care, but this required intensive planning and investment. Therefore, they would welcome help and guidance from ECDC. In addition, it was necessary to take a long hard look at preparedness plans and assess whether they were fit for purpose in terms of what might come in the future. It was also important not to neglect diseases other than COVID-19 (e.g. catching up on childhood vaccinations) to prevent a resurgence of other vaccine-preventable diseases.

35. Aura Timen, European Public Health Association (EUPHA), suggested taking the goals set at EU level for surveillance and preparedness and using them as a baseline to establish a minimum level across the EU rather than aiming too high. Over the last two years there had been a great deal of variation in levels so it was perhaps better to aim for a basic level that all EU/EEA countries could achieve.

36. Jonathan Suk, Principal Expert Emergency Preparedness and Response, Public Health Functions Unit, ECDC, agreed that it was important to take into account social acceptance and the cost benefit of NPIs and this was a topic that ECDC would be examining this year. He also confirmed that ECDC would be reviewing preparedness and response surveillance and the first step was to try and document and assess the lessons learned.

ECDC Chief Scientist's Annual Report on the work of the Advisory Forum, 2021

37. Mike Catchpole, Chief Scientist, ECDC said that he had distributed a report with an update on the work of the AF in 2021 before the meeting. He pointed out that ECDC had reviewed feedback from the AF very closely and, on the basis of discussions during the sixth COVID-19 Consultation meeting on 3 February 2022, looked at how the Agency could be more responsive to the concerns of the AF members. He reiterated that ECDC was very grateful to all of the AF members for their work. The purpose of the Chief Scientist's annual report on the work of the AF was the result of one of ECDC's external evaluations following comments on the need to bridge the gap between the Management Board and the AF.

38. There were no comments on the contents of the report.

Any other business

39. Mike Catchpole explained that the dates of the next AF meeting (originally planned for April) needed to be changed, and ECDC proposed pushing back this meeting to 17–18 May 2022. This meeting would be a hybrid meeting (both online and physical) so those who were able to come to Stockholm would be very welcome at the Agency. In the meantime, ECDC would revert if there was a need for an additional COVID-19 consultation meeting. He looked forward to seeing everyone for the next meeting in May.

Annex: List of participants

Member State	Representative	Status
Austria	Petra Apfalter	Member
Croatia	Aleksandar Šimunović	Alternate
Czech Republic	Jan Kynčl	Member
Czech Republic	Kateřina Fabiánová	Alternate
Denmark	Henrik Ullum	Member
Estonia	Natalia Kerbo	Member
France	Isabelle Bonmarin	Alternate
Germany	Osamah Hamouda	Member
Hungary	Zsuzsanna Molnár	Member
Ireland	Lorraine Doherty	Member
Italy	Silvia Decich	Member
Latvia	Jurijs Perevoščikovs	Member
Lithuania	Jurgita Pakalniškienė	Member
Lithuania	Rolanda Valintėlienė	Alternate
Luxembourg	Isabel De La Fuente Garcia	Member
Malta	Tanya Melillo	Alternate
The Netherlands	Susan van den Hof	Alternate
Portugal	Ana Maria Correia	Alternate
Romania	Adriana Pistol	Member
Romania	Cristian Radu Cucuiu	Alternate
Slovakia	Mária Avdičová	Member
Slovenia	Marta Grgič Vitek	Alternate
Sweden	Birgitta Lesko	Alternate

Observers		
Norway	Frode Forland	Member
European Commission Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)		
European Institute of Women's Health	Rebecca Moore	Member
European Public Health Association	Aura Timen	Member
European Liver Patients' Association	Marko Korenjak	Alternate
European Commission		
DG SANTÉ	Virginia Arnecci	
World Health Organization (WHO Europe)		
Danilo Lo Fo Wong		