Summary

Virtual meeting of Chief Medical Officers under Germany's EU Council Presidency 2020 | 29 September 2020

"Enforcing contact tracing for safer travel – lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic"

Preliminary remarks

Upon invitation of the German Presidency of the Council of the European Union (EU), Chief Medical Officers (CMO) of Member States met in a virtual format on 29 September 2020. Representatives from the European Commission, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the World Health Organization (WHO) EURO, and the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) states, as well as experts from the EU-funded Joint Action 'Healthy Gateways' also attended the meeting and shared their views.

Content of the meeting

After welcoming remarks by Hans-Ulrich Holtherm (Federal Ministry of Health, Germany) and Lothar H. Wieler (Robert Koch Institute, Germany), experts from the EU-funded Joint Action 'Healthy Gateways' highlighted current challenges of contact tracing at all points of entry (airports, ports, and ground crossings) and proposed potential solutions. The following *tour de table* focused on each Member State's and institution's specific challenges and how they could be addressed within the EU and, potentially, globally. The participating Member States generally welcomed the opportunity to discuss these difficulties and stressed the necessity of a coordinated, holistic, transnational, and digital solution towards the challenges mentioned.

Discussion results

1. All participating Member States agreed that competent public health authorities need sufficient access to relevant passenger data in a timely fashion in order to conduct contact tracing in transportation.
There was broad agreement among participating Member States that various challenges continue to hamper contact tracing in the transport sector in different degrees – a lesson of the COVID-19 pandemic, in line with former experience with other infectious diseases (e.g. SARS-CoV-1, measles, tuberculosis).

2. Some participating Member States have already established systems of digital registration for incoming travellers and/or use digital passenger locator forms, primarily in the aviation sector, so that challenges such as the availability of passenger lists or resources required for handling paper-based passenger locator forms do not or do not fully apply in these States.

3. Most importantly, competent public health authorities, once notified of confirmed cases, often lack timely and sufficient access to relevant traveller data to take necessary actions. Relevant challenges include, for example, the availability of single points of contact of relevant carriers, the timeliness of response by carriers, and the availability and quality of passenger lists.

4. Participants stressed that the challenges in contact tracing vary by points of entry and by country and seem to be greatest in means of transport without assigned seating or standardized booking procedures (e.g. bus or train).

5. There was vast support for addressing the above-mentioned challenges at the EU-level and more globally, both in the short and the long run. This requires technical, legal, and global solutions in accordance with data protection laws and a consensus on a digitalised and standardized data set on travellers.

6. The participating Member States agreed that there is a pressing need for single points of contact to be legally required of all carriers and transport companies with cross-border activities in the EU and that consultations with relevant agencies should be initiated.

7. Regarding the technical options, there was major support for establishing sustainable digital solutions at EU-level, such as a system of digital registration for all incoming travellers (single-window platform) in line with current data protection regulations.

8. Some participating Member States stressed the necessity of assessing the effectiveness of contact tracing in transport, including the attack rate after a primary case on board of an aircraft, ship, bus, or train has been identified.
9. The vast majority of participating Member States welcomed measures to follow-up on the interoperability of Corona Tracing and Warning Apps, and to promote the use, as well as the technical development of such Apps.
10. Most of the participating Member States are in favour of politically committing to a global standardised procedure for data exchange between the transport and health sectors in the context of the International Health Regulations.