



17.12.2024

MISSION REPORT

following the the SANT mission to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in Stockholm (Sweden), from 28 October to 29 October 2024

Subcommittee on Public Health

Members of the mission:

Elena NEVADO del CAMPO	(EPP, Spain) (Leader of the mission)
Marta Temido	(S&D, Portugal)
András Tivadar KULJA	(EPP, Hungary)

Introduction

On 28 and 29 October 2024, the SANT Subcommittee visited the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) in Stockholm (Sweden). The delegation was composed of three Members from different Member States representing two political groups (EPP and S&D).

The purpose of this mission was to gather information about the current and planned activities of the Agency. The participant Members met with the director and other representatives of the ECDC, discussed best practices to manage health crises, and how epidemiological data is collected and used to influence public health policies in the EU. The visit also enabled Members to get a better insight of the challenges of public health, as well as on measures to prevent and control communicable diseases, in particular what concerns the MPox crisis.

Summary account of meetings

Meetings on Monday, 28 October

Participants:

Elena Nevado del Campo
Marta Temido
András Tivadar Kulja
Pamela Rendi-Wagner, ECDC Director
Vicky Lefevre, Head of Unit Public Health Functions
Bruno Ciancio, Deputy Head of Unit Public Health Functions, Head of Section Surveillance
Kathryn Edwards, Principal Expert European Cooperation, Liaison EP affairs
Karam Adel, Policy Expert Communicable Disease Prevention and Control
Nicolas White, Communication Officer

13:30 - 14:15: Welcome by ECDC Director, incl. working lunch

Topic for discussion: Restoring trust in public health and in EU health institutions - How to counter misinformation and disinformation

During the working lunch hosted by Pamela Rendi-Wagner, ECDC Director, Members and the ECDC representatives discussed misinformation and disinformation, as well as its impact in public health. They addressed subjects such as the lack of trust from general society in public health institutions, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, and exchanged views on possible solutions to tackle these challenges.

14:30 - 15:30: Presentation of ECDC's main areas of work, incl. general discussion and question time

15:30 - 16:00: ECDC's strengthened mandate within the European Health Union – What does the new mandate entail and how is it being implemented?

Pamela Rendi-Wagner, ECDC Director
Heads of Unit and Deputies Head of Unit

Ms Rendi-Wagner presented the organisation of the Agency and the main areas of work. She informed Members that the Centre currently collects, analyses and shares data on more than 50 infectious diseases, and cooperates with partners all over the world, sharing knowledge, exchanging information and promoting best practices among public health experts. On the implementation of the new mandate, the Director explained that the agency had been establishing partnerships with Member States, setting up country preparedness assessment visits, and that these had started recently in some MS. She referred that these visits, that are aimed at understanding the specific needs of MS and to assess the prevention programmes, preparedness and response plans, and their implementation. Ms Rendi-Wagner elaborated on the lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, pointing at the need to collect and integrate more data in the eHealth systems of the Member States. She also highlighted the need of more cooperation and trust built at global level, and explained that ECDC is expanding the collaboration with international partners. As example, she referred to the regular meetings of a network of CDCs, to exchange information on the most important health issues.

On the Q&A session, Members inquired on the current situation of the Agency's resources and budget, the impact of the surveillance framework in the information, monitoring and assessment of the resilience of health systems, and the GDPR regulation as a barrier to data collection. The debate developed on how the EP could help ECDC to meet its objectives in these matters.

16:15 - 17:00: ECDC surveillance of communicable diseases

Bruno Ciancio, Deputy Head of Unit PHF, Head of Section Surveillance

Bruno Ciancio, Deputy Head of Unit PHF, Head of Section Surveillance briefed the delegation on the surveillance of communicable diseases. He highlighted the importance of surveillance of communicable diseases at EU level, saying that it served multiple purposes, including early warning for detection of outbreaks, quantification of the disease burden and steering prevention and control strategies. Mr Ciancio also underlined the importance of epidemic intelligence and collaboration with international partners, which was crucial for early warnings. He went on highlighting genomic surveillance as another important source of data, used to detect epidemics, identify infection sources, assess and monitor virulence and transmissibility, predict resistance to antimicrobials, and the effectiveness of vaccines. He presented the GenEpi-BioTrain, an interdisciplinary training in genomic epidemiology and public health bioinformatics, and concluded with the indication that ECDC had been part of the consortium working on the pilot project for the European Health Data Space (EHDS).

Participants engaged in a discussion on the impact assessment of vaccination, communication strategies and the importance of a comprehensive and timely communication to address public distrust. Regarding the support from ECDC to the MS, Members inquired on the level of engagement of the different MS, and its impact on data collection.

17:00 - 17:45: How is ECDC better prepared for future health emergencies in the EU and contributing to global health security preparedness

Vicky Lefevre, Head of Unit Public Health Functions

Vicky Lefevre, Head of Unit Public Health Functions, presented the ECDC's enhanced preparedness for future health emergencies and its contributions to global health security. She highlighted several key initiatives, including the EU Health Task Force and Preparedness Efforts, which had been established to provide effective operational responses during crisis and to support MS and non-EU Countries in strengthening preparedness. She went on to explaining the several phases of the country preparedness assessments, mentioning that these were based on 16 capacities (laboratories, surveillance, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), amongst others). Ms Lefevre emphasised the importance of training programmes such as the ECDC Fellowship programme training programs in the field of epidemiology (EPIET) and public health microbiology (EUPHEM), the Mediterranean and Black Sea Programme for Intervention Epidemiology Training (MediPIET), and the new training programme for emergency preparedness and response, developed after the COVID-19 pandemic and to be launched in 2025. Regarding reference laboratories (EURLs), Ms Lefevre explained that the Agency is developing a network of laboratories in the MS, appointed by the Commission and funded by EU4Health. She presented the Early Warning Response System (EWRS), a system developed to allow notifications and management of alerts related to serious cross-border health threats. She elaborated also on the involvement of ECDC in strengthening health security in the EU candidate countries and in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) partners, collaborating with National Public Health Institutes in these regions to boost preparedness and response capacities. She concluded by informing on the collaboration with the Africa CDC in areas such as event based surveillance and epidemic intelligence.

Members posed questions covering the work of the Agency on the One Health approach and the collaboration with the European Food Safety Agency (EFSA). The discussion continued on whether a country with a more centralised health system would be more prepared to deal with health threats, and on the criteria for the distribution of EURLs.

Meetings on Tuesday, 29 October

Participants

Elena Nevado del Campo
Marta Temido
András Tivadar Kulja
Kathryn Edwards, Principal Expert European Cooperation, Liaison EP affairs
Karam Adel, Policy Expert Communicable Disease Prevention and Control
Dominique Monnet, Head of Section AMR and Healthcare-Associated infections
Sabrina Bacci, Head of Section Vaccine-preventable diseases
Anastasia Pharris, Principal Expert Infectious Diseases, STIs, Blood-Borne Viruses and TB
Thomas Hofmann, Head of Section Emergency Preparedness and Response
Vicky Lefevre, Head of Unit Public Health Functions

09:00 - 09:10: **Welcome to Day 2**

Kathryn Edwards, Principal Expert European Cooperation, Liaison EP affairs
Karam Adel, Policy Expert Communicable Disease Prevention and Control

09:10 - 09:40: Antimicrobial resistance and healthcare-associated infections

Dominique Monnet, Head of Section AMR and Healthcare-Associated infections

Dominique Monnet, Head of Section AMR and Healthcare-Associated infections, explained the significant public health challenges of antimicrobial resistance and healthcare-associated infections, explaining that these contributed to the spread of multidrug-resistant organisms. He stressed that according to the estimations, in the EU, around 800,000 infections with AMR microorganisms occurred in people each year, and that this resulted in over 35,000 deaths and more than one million of years of life lost due to disability or premature death. He highlighted that more than 70% of this burden was linked to healthcare associated infections. Mr Monnet went on informing on the work developed by the Agency on this matter, such as the surveillance systems (EARS-Net and EURGen-Net) and the communication strategies in place. He also mentioned the Council recommendation adopted in June 2024, that included indicative targets for MS to combat AMR, and informed that MS showed different levels of progress. Mr Monnet concluded by pointing some measures to tackle this subject, such as the prudent use of antimicrobials and more efforts at preventing cross-transmission particularly in healthcare.

During the debate, Members raised various topics including the role of healthcare professionals and the industry in antibiotic prescriptions, the link between workforce shortages and lowered preventive measures, and long-term strategies to control AMR.

09:40- 10:10: ECDC's work on vaccine-preventable diseases, including vaccine uptake and hesitancy

Sabrina Bacci, Head of Section Vaccine-preventable diseases

Sabrina Bacci, Head of Section Vaccine-preventable diseases, briefed Members on the diseases currently covered by vaccination and the work developed by ECDC on this matter, informing that the Agency coordinated two strategic networks (national focal points for vaccine preventable diseases, and the national immunization technical advisory groups (NITAGs)). She shared data on the vaccination coverage of several diseases, highlighting that this was a critical public health tool for their prevention, especially in vulnerable people. Ms Bacci presented the Vaccine Monitoring Platform (VMP), a collaboration of ECDC with the European Medicines Agency (EMA) on the effectiveness and safety of vaccines, and explained the several types of scientific advice that the Agency provided to the MS. She concluded with some notes on acceptance, presenting examples of the resources and tools available for healthcare professionals.

Members posed questions related to the awareness of Human Papilloma Virus and the vaccination of boys, and on the reasons for possible inefficiency of vaccination programmes, the impact of disinformation, and measures to achieve more effectiveness in vaccination campaigns.

10:25 - 10:55: ECDC's work on Sexually Transmitted Infections and on HIV in particular
Anastasia Pharris, Principal Expert Infectious Diseases, STIs, Blood-Borne Viruses and TB

Anastasia Pharris, Principal Expert Infectious Diseases, STIs, Blood-Borne Viruses and TB, reported on the progress and ongoing challenges in combating Sexually Transmitted Infections

(STIs), which have been on the rise after the COVID-19 pandemic. She informed that the EU actions on this matter had proved to be successful, and that ECDC coordinated networks on these infections, worked with external stakeholders and aimed at building capacity in the MS. Focusing on the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), Ms Pharris detailed that around 778 000 people living with it had the infection under control, and that the target was to reduce the incidence by 90% by 2030. She highlighted that in general there was a period of three years between the infection and the diagnostic, and that this posed one of the main challenges in the EU. She concluded calling the attention to the fact that HIV is not declining and that stigma and discrimination in healthcare remain the major barriers.

The discussion that followed focused on the need for targeted campaigns for women, stigma and discrimination, and the assessment of the quality of life of ageing HIV patients. Members were also interested in the importance of partnerships, raising awareness, data collection and advancing scientific research to counter the rise of STIs.

10:55 -11:25: ECDC's response to emerging health threats, including examples of avian influenza, Mpox, and Marburg

Thomas Hofmann, Head of Section Emergency Preparedness and Response Support

Thomas Hofmann, Head of Section Emergency Preparedness and Response Support presented the Agency's detection and disease monitoring activities. He highlighted the ongoing work with global and regional partners to track and respond to communicable disease threats, ensuring robust pandemic preparedness across Members States. He elaborated on the monitoring systems such as EpiPulse and EWRS (Early Warning and Response System), and explained that, alongside the collaboration with WHO, Africa CDC and DG NEAR, ECDC is strengthening disease prevention and response across all the EU. He concluded by saying that there had been three recent emerging health threats on the rise (avian influenza, Mpox and Marburg virus disease), with ongoing ECDC's monitoring and reporting programs.

11:30 - 12:00: Participation in the ECDC Daily roundtables

Vicky Lefevre, Head of Unit Public Health Functions

Members had the opportunity to take part in the roundtable meeting, where the Agency monitors and assesses the threats to health, as well as carry out the appropriate actions. The information dealt with in this daily meeting is obtained by screening various sources or via notification by formal sources, such as the EWRS.

12:00 – 12:15: Wrap up and conclusions of the visit

Kathryn Edwards and Vicky Lefevre concluded the two-day visit program, summarising the topics discussed.

Conclusions

The SANT delegation was very satisfied with the programme, its diversity and the quality of meetings. The meetings ran smoothly, with lively debates with the collocutors. Participating Members were pleased to have first-hand information on the work of the Agency and how it contributes to the protection of EU citizens. Members also considered of extreme value to

have gathered relevant information for the future work of the Subcommittee, in subjects such as surveillance, preparedness, AMR, vaccine preventable diseases, STIs and emerging health threats.