

Apologies: [REDACTED] 5.1.2e

Observers: [REDACTED] 5.1.2e UK GO-Science; [REDACTED] 5.1.2e for Western Europe, UK FCDO; UK GCSA Private Office.

Actions:

- UK to circulate summary technical paper on new variant (released last night)
- UK, France, Switzerland to share papers on schools/children.
- Germany to provide further detail on Austrian paper (authored by [REDACTED] 5.1.2e).
- France to share results of flash study currently underway.
- GO-Science to arrange another meeting in 2-3 weeks.

Key points:

- General:
 - All nations find this meeting useful with a view that its informal nature and the information sharing is working well.

- New Variants:
 - VOC 202012/01 (UK variant) is 30-50% more transmissible. Now dominant in London and the South and growing elsewhere. Growth across the country is an issue but not severity of cases. South African variant presents a worry but only a few cases have been detected so far.
 - No evidence the new variants are spread differently so all existing measures (e.g. 2m rule, face masks) are being reinforced.
 - Discussion around the origin of the new variants with the working hypothesis they have come from immunosuppressed individuals.
 - France saw the first UK variant in Paris – where the individual had no link to the UK. France undertaking a flash study on positive cases. Initial results will be available on Monday, with sequencing to follow. Also looking at geographic location.
 - France has had three cases of South African variant so far, and in one case had noted a very short incubation period (2 days).
 - 15,000 Germans visited South Africa over Christmas – concern that people are still travelling.
 - Discussion of importance of not solely concentrating on recent two variants.
 - France noted there may be a shortage in the plastic required for sequencing material and thus it would be important to diversify sequencing techniques.

- Vaccines:
 - UK now vaccinated ¼ of over-80s and 10% of care homes. Hope to accelerate care homes in the next few weeks, and then work down the age groups. The population will get whichever vaccine is available in their area with the second jab being mixed only in emergencies. Likely more difficult to reach areas will get the AZ vaccine as it is easier to transport.
 - Discussion around evaluation of whether vaccines protect against new variants. Data still being gathered in UK on this and we will know more in 6 weeks. Also noted that South Africa is a major trial site so vaccines will be tested against new variants.
 - Discussion around vaccinating into an outbreak which isn't good from an immunological point of view and escape mutants.
 - Discussion about whether to treat people who have had the vaccine differently to those who haven't. No data at present on whether the vaccine prevents transmission.

- Schools:
 - Political pressure to keep schools open across Europe, but seeing big outbreaks.
 - In UK seen relative decrease in infection rates in children (11-18 year olds) but schools have been shut.

- Introduction into households in UK is quite often children (11-18 year olds), but elsewhere in Europe children are rarely the index.
- In France high school, middle school and daycare settings have seen an increase in risk of infection, but not primary schools.

- Transmission:

- Germany now experiencing 1,000 deaths a day. People who have recovered don't have to go into quarantine. Feeling that politicians aren't being strong enough and the general public don't understand the severity of the issues. Home working is still not standard practice and so many people still using public transport. Concern despite huge capacity in intensive care.
- In UK there is evidence of spread between healthcare workers and between patients but less so between healthcare workers and patients.
- At present everyone entering Belgium is being tested. 2,000 arrivals from UK with only 5% testing positive, but 15% of arrivals from Romania have been positive.
- France seeing 25,000 new infections per day and planning to vaccinate between 12-15M people by the end of March/beginning of Apr starting with elderly and vulnerable patients. Decision on stricter curfew next week.

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External International Science Coordination, Engagement and Transparency
Team, Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)
Government Office for Science

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