



Introduction

Mariano Votta, Director of Active Citizenship Network (ACN)

Good afternoon and welcome to all.

It is always a pleasure and a great opportunity to meet representatives and leaders of civil society organisations (CSOs) and patient advocacy groups (PAGs) working at local and national level to protect patients' rights.

I hope that all of you, attending in Brussels, had a pleasant trip and that you, connected remotely, are also well.

Thank you all for joining us.

As Bianca already mentioned, today and tomorrow we will focus on vaccine preventable respiratory diseases (VPRS). In particular, today's meeting will be totally dedicated to COVID and Long COVID, as part of the activities carried out within the European project '*Empowering & mobilising PAGs on COVID-19 prevention & treatments for vulnerable target groups*' realized by Cittadinanzattiva-Active Citizenship Network and supported by Pfizer, whom I thank for the support.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank today's three media partners, HealthEuropa, TrendSanità-Policy and Procurement in HealthCare and the '*Journal of Medical and Clinical Case Reports*', an international peer reviewed journal published by Medvix publications.

Background and the need for ongoing vigilance

In this last period, let's say since September 2024, on the one hand we have heard about a new study¹ that tries to give some answers regarding the origin of Covid, which is still a mystery. Experts emphasise the importance of understanding the origins of the Covid pandemic especially as it concerns national security and public health.

On the other hand, we heard experts' concern about the new Xec² variant labelled as “more contagious than previous ones”³, that the ‘virus will continue to mutate’ and ‘has become something to live with’, that ‘Covid is still a life-threatening risk for fragile⁴ and at-risk individuals’^{5,6}, but also that the ‘new vaccines protect’ so that ‘the protection offered by vaccination remains crucial’⁷.

Following this, the recommendations of the health authorities in each country were published. In Italy, for example, on 17 September 2024 the Ministry of Health issued Covid recommendations⁸ for the autumn season⁹ and for vaccination with a precise list of the groups of people to whom booster vaccination with the new vaccine¹⁰ is recommended. Certainly useful indications, it is a pity that they are not directly addressed to the population, and that in many cases not enough is done to reach the frail.

In my opinion, the decline in COVID-19 testing worldwide has reduced the focus on public health measures to reduce infections among vulnerable populations at higher risk of serious outcomes and

¹ <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/09/covid-caccia-allanimale-che-ha-scatenato-la-pandemia-cane-procione-la-specie-favorita-cdac4923-ce75-4de1-adf1-4283cb81cf87.html>

² <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/10/covid-dilaga-la-variante-xec-sintomi-contagi-e-vaccino-1cefb89c-6ad5-44a8-af73-bfb6399c9095.html>

³ <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/08/covid-la-nuova-variante-xec-accelera-la-sua-diffusione-ed-anche-in-italia-72674874-d05a-4e40-88ca-24f96644bb53.html>

⁴ <https://www.rainews.it/video/2024/09/covid-in-aumento-variante-xec-ciccozzi-sintomi-lievi-ma-attenzione-ai-fragili-1a4a41cb-28d2-44bd-b76c-51ebde5fec4e.html>

⁵ <https://www.rainews.it/video/2024/10/covid-variante-xec-pregliasco-sembra-un-raffreddore-ma-ti-annienta-23720403-09b8-4f3a-aca6-df194f0c9f45.html>

⁶ <https://www.rainews.it/video/2024/10/vaccinazioni-ordine-dei-medici-fondamentale-proteggere-i-pazienti-fragili-influenza-54fbc0b6-dc63-4941-ac03-cdb74fdc45b7.html>

⁷ <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/09/covid-la-variante-xec-preoccupa-gli-esperti-piu-contagiosa-delle-precedenti-aed3952f-f9e6-4c09-9414-eb1367b9819f.html>

⁸ <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2024/09/vaccino-covid-dose-annuale-e-gratis-per-tutti-raccomandato-per-over-60-fragili-e-gravidanza-ed4f6f0b-05f6-4313-8bfe-32d92c855402.html>

⁹ <https://www.salute.gov.it/portale/nuovocoronavirus/homeNuovoCoronavirus.jsp>

¹⁰ 17 settembre 2024 - Circolare del Ministero della Salute n. 27825 - Indicazioni e raccomandazioni per la campagna di vaccinazione autunnale/invernale 2024/2025 anti COVID-19.
<https://www.trovanorme.salute.gov.it/norme/renderNormsanPdf?anno=2024&codLeg=102602&parte=1%20&serie=null>

long-term complications. With the lack of current guidance and misinformation on prevention, vaccination and treatment, COVID-19 continues to have a pervasive impact on high-risk communities.

We are also here today to emphasise that despite the end of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) ¹¹, COVID-19 remains an ongoing public health threat. Worldwide, thousands of people continue to be infected with COVID-19 every week, exposing vulnerable populations to an increased risk of serious illness, death or ongoing consequences of infection. Across all age groups, approximately 10-20% of those infected may suffer long COVID, while those with milder illnesses continue to require interruption of work or education, with long-term effects on productivity and the economy.

COVID-19 poses an ongoing threat to health system stability at a critical time of reconstruction, particularly during the autumn/winter seasons when it co-circulates with other respiratory diseases, such as influenza and pneumonia.

To raise awareness and inform policymakers addressing health inequalities, it is critical to understand how COVID-19 continues to affect the daily lives - including mental well-being - of medically vulnerable populations and their carers in the post-pandemic era.

Thanks to independent experts, from the WHO European Regional Office and our new partner - the World Federation of Public Health Associations - whom I would like to thank in advance, a common set of up-to-date information will be provided today.

After the coffee break, we will get to know *'The COVID Community Council'* and then focus on how to ensure that our voice is heard by the new European institutions: in this regard, we have invited a Public Affairs Consultancy and a communications agency to help us.

We invite you, as always, to make the most of this opportunity by interacting and not hesitating to ask questions. We need to feel comfortable this afternoon and if you have any special needs, please do not hesitate to let us know. We look forward to learning more because, again, being well informed and up-to-date is often the best prerequisite for promoting greater activism. Thank you again for your participation. I wish you a fruitful event.

¹¹ A PHEIC is an extraordinary event that constitutes a public health risk to other countries through international spread of disease and potentially requires a coordinated international response. <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-%282005%29-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-%28covid-19%29-pandemic>