

Addressing the challenges of concomitant deployment of COVID-19 and influenza vaccination

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OPENING REMARKS

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Welcome and good morning also from me.

“It's Europe's moment. On 27, 28 and 29 December vaccination will start across the EU. We protect our citizens together”. With this message on twitter, exactly one year ago, the 17th of December 2020, the President of the EU Commission Ursula von der Leyen announced that, at the end of the month, vaccination against the coronavirus would have started across the EU.

The choice of today as the date of our meeting is therefore not causal but wants us to remember when and in which situation we started, also to stimulate a first assessment that I am sure our moderator Gary, whom I thank in advance, will want to propose to our more than qualified guests.

For my part, without going into the analysis of the data that will soon be presented by my colleague Daniela, I would like to share the following considerations:

- 1) We are still in the middle of the fight against the pandemic, although with tools, organization, resources, and awareness greatly strengthened. I would not have bet that, for example, at the European level we would have had a vaccine available to children or that, at the national level, in my country Italy, which was the first country in the EU to be hit and among the most affected ones by the pandemic, in mid-December 2021, almost 85% of the over 12¹ population would have completed the anti-Covid-19 vaccination cycle. Even if it is now well established that the booster dose will be urgently needed as the battle is long and we are still far from winning it.

1 <https://www.governo.it/it/cscovid19/report-vaccini/>

- 2) Also for this reason, it is no longer time to have a “neutral” attitude or one as mere "observers", as we are sometimes used to hear, for example, in defining the role of the media. Either we are in favor of science and we predispose ourselves in a perspective of health as a public good, playing each an active role to increase vaccination coverages, or in fact we are supporters of the virus. The scientific evidence is clear: vaccination is an essential public health tool to strengthen individuals’ ability to maintain good health over the course of their lives and helps to guarantee our fundamental rights as European citizens. By avoiding illness, vaccination programmes deliver long-term cost savings and potential economic growth. What better way to invest in our future?
- 3) I have deliberately spoken in the plural form about vaccination coverages because there is no doubt that the pandemic has impacted on many aspects of our health, including the so-called routine vaccinations for which we must maintain a high level of attention, especially regarding vaccinations available to adults. Adults who vaccinate for Covid and are hesitant about a series of other vaccinations that would provide additional protection is a small but great nonsense that must be overcome.
- 4) We are reading in this period of "vaccine apartheid" with reference to the huge differences in access to vaccines in the world: without looking too far, we risk in finding the vaccine apartheid even at home, if we do not devote specific attention to marginalized groups of the population (local communities of immigrants / irregular migrants / homeless, etc..). And if many of us are feeling powerless about what is happening in the South of the World, we should not feel equally powerless in the context where we can act concretely.

The second type of my remarks concerns the work that will soon be presented by my colleague Daniela, whom I thank in advance for the commitment and quality she has put into it. It is good to clarify right away that the survey we carried out: a) was not addressed directly to citizens but to a highly qualified target of HCPs, institutions, leaders of PAGs & civic organizations. B) the objective is not to express any value judgment, but rather to collect diversified but all qualified points of view, from which to develop a constructive discussion animated by - and this is the third characteristic of the work we are presenting today - c) the common desire to identify areas for improvement (while we are not interested in condemning or blaming anyone). All this, starting from both a professional and human (as individual citizens) background that more than 80

professionals wanted to share and who, of course, I can only thank for the willingness and interest shown in our activities.

Finally, let me thank in advance all the panelists invited, in particular the EU Commission for confirming also in this occasion its continuous interest and high attention in our initiatives, and the moderator: Gary Finnegan, who is Editor of Vaccines Today. I would like to remind that in his country, Ireland, Gary has been the winner of the EU Health Prize for Journalism on three occasions and has won two Irish Medical Media Awards. So, he is the right person to chair our event today.

I wish you a fruitful webinar.