WHO/ECDC influenza network teleconference on COVID-19 and children: Meeting Notes

15th July 2020

Aim of meeting to bring together national public health authorities across the Region to discuss epidemiology of COVID-19 in children, evidence of children driven transmission, possible interventions to control and potential implications of re-opening schools come start of new term.

Brief introduction by Dr. Richard Pebody (WHO EURO):

Age distribution of cases and deaths (WHO Weekly Surveillance Report) – few cases <25 years, most cases >25 years, majority of deaths >65 years old. Age-specific infection-fatality ratios (IFR) – similar.

In study 'Susceptibility to SARS-CoV-2 infection amongst children and adolescents compared with adults: a systematic review and meta-analysis': There is preliminary evidence that children and young people have lower susceptibility to SARS-CoV2, with a 56% lower odds of being an infected contact. There is weak evidence that children and young people play a lesser role in transmission of SARS-CoV-2 at a population level.

In a transmission study – children were as likely to be infected as adults.

Some countries in Europe have closed and re-opened schools – some have seen an increase since (eg. Israel)

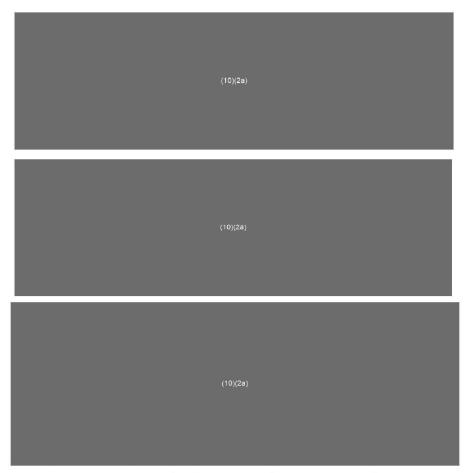
Questions: to what extent are children transmitting SARS-CoV-2 amongst themselves and to adults, what impact will reopening school have on transmission (in children or the wider community), what interventions are required to reduce transmission amongst children.

COVID-19 epidemiology in children: Country results

ECDC – ECDC Technical Report on the role of educational facilities in driving community transmission

A technical report, which will provide an overview of epi situation relating to COVID-19 among children, to be published in early August. Will assess the role of educational settings in COVID-19 transmission and secondary transmission in these settings

- Questionnaire to be sent to countries to gather information on any outbreaks of COVID-19 in edu settings in countries and evidence of transmission from children to adults (in edu settings or in general)
- So far, 15 countries have replied. Data collection ongoing.
- Most countries have seen some cases or clusters in schools, however it is an exception rather than the norm.
- Limited role of children
- Children less severely affected by COVID-19
- Limited evidence of secondary transmission in schools



WHO EURO – PHSM team - COVID-19 in children – control and prevention measures: what have countries been going?

- Approaches to school closures diverse across the EURO Region
- Countries always adapting to changing situation
- 14th July, 23 countries have no school closures, 1 country recommended closure of schools (partial or complete), 21 implementing closure of some levels of closure, 8 implementing full closure of all schools at all levels.
- Some countries have rotational system alternate days for face-to-face teaching

- Several countries announced that will be reopening come new term (10)2a (10)(2a) (10)(2a) (10)(2a)
- EURO seen localized outbreaks directly linked to schools e.g Israel observed sharp spike in
 cases since return in May. Result was immediate closure, testing of staff and students and
 quarantine. Precautionary measure, some other schools have also closed due to local situation
 e.g (10)(2a) slaughterhouse outbreak
- Some countries have reintroduced PHSM due to localized outbreaks, eg school closure in (10)(2a) (2a) (10)(2a)
- Common preventative measures: compulsory mask wearing, hand-washing, physical distancing, screening (temperature), smaller class sizes and organized entry/exit routes.



WHO HQ - "UNITY" STUDIES: WHO early sero-epidemiological investigations for COVID-19

- These are standardized protocols for rapid and systematic collection of information on various outbreaks
- Ownership of data remains with individual countries/sites
- School transmission outbreak investigation protocol in final stages soon to be published.
- Unity studies: 91 countries intend to implement one or several of WHO sero-epi investigations (66 % being LMIC), 45 have started implementation (57% LMICs)

WHO EURO – COVID-19 and children – Dr. Martin Weber – Programme Manager – Child and Adolescent Health

- Children and adolescents are less directly affected by COVID-19

- However, seriously affected by control measures eg. Closure of schools (education affected etc), disruption of social contact (mental health, domestic violence at home, less access to support networks or social and health services), poverty (poor housing, crowded environment)
- Vulnerable children and those with special needs highly affected
- Low incidence of severe disease in children
- Role of children as spreaders in school and in household limited evidence, less common that thought, mitigation measures required are unclear.
- Negative impact/effects on children due to pandemic can be mitigated Global initiatives –
 Technical Advisory Group (TAG) of Experts on Education Institutes and COVID-19 WHO/HQ
 joint with UNESCO. Regional advisory group for children planned. Working groups such as
 Transmission group and Indirect Effects group working to compile research evidence and initiate
 further research on this topic.
- Urgently need comparative studies of different interventions and their effect on immunity and transmission; more rigorous review mechanism is needed before imposing and consider long term adverse effects

Summary:

- Several countries report follow up of children going back to school following closure of schools as part of non-pharmaceutical interventions to curb the spread of SARS-CoV2.
- In general, seeing low transmission within children and education settings. However, in some
 countries, the easing of NPI measures such as school closures has triggered clusters in schools
 and lead to spillover in to the wider community (e.g. 10)(2a).
- Early intervention is essential to prevent and control spread.
- Vigilance and preparation is needed as the new season approaches and increased circulation of other respiratory infections.

Questions/Comments:

