

AOB: Background Note from The Netherlands

Coordination and collaboration on post COVID-19

In the European Union people from all Member States are being affected by post COVID-19. The World Health Organization defines this condition, which is commonly also known as long COVID, as the continuation or development of new symptoms three months after the initial SARS-CoV-2 infection, with these symptoms lasting for at least two months with no other explanation.

It has been estimated that 12,5% of people that were infected by SARS-CoV-2 develop post COVID-19. At least sixty-five million individuals worldwide are estimated to have post COVID-19, with cases increasing daily. According to the background document of the European Commission for the 13 December 2022 EU-US Long COVID conference, EU Member States have responded in different ways and speed to post COVID-19. The PHIRI project showed that in early 2022, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovenia, and Norway had planned processes for a coordinated management, including for instance medical guidelines for diagnosis and treatment. At that time, Portugal, Italy, Slovakia, and Ireland had partially planned processes for coordinated management. Only Sweden had a COVID registry with a focus on post COVID-19. In another study, it has been reported that in some EU countries specialist post COVID-19 clinics have been set up, including Belgium, France, Germany and Spain. Besides, research has been set up in several Member States. An overview to what all these separated planned processes and studies has led to is missing and coordination and cooperation between institutes in the Member states alongside the research in the framework of Horizon Europe is often lacking.

Post COVID-19 prevents people from participating in the labor market. A study published in The Lancet found that 22% of people with post COVID-19 were unable to work due to ill health, and another 45% had to reduce hours worked. Post Covid-19 creates additional pressure on the healthcare system and, most importantly, severely affects the personal life of those affected. It is of utmost importance to ensure that people with post COVID-19 are able to participate in our society. Therefore, The Netherlands would like to advocate for extended attention regarding post COVID-19 in order to provide perspective to people affected by this condition.

Scientific research is crucial for providing perspective as it inter alia enables to make a diagnosis and draw up a treatment plan for those who experience the symptoms of post

COVID-19. The Netherlands welcomes the research that is already being done nationally and internationally into post COVID-19, but an overview of these research and possible gaps on specific elements is still lacking. Moreover, it is important that research results reach healthcare providers, researchers, and patients as quickly as possible. This is especially true for potentially promising treatments on post COVID-19.

Therefore, on the 9th of December 2022, and in the framework of the Employment, Social Policy, Health, and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO), The Netherlands called for a comprehensive and collaborative EU-wide effort to facilitate the exchange of best practices among clinical centers and practitioners and to develop a EU coordinated post COVID-19 research agenda. There was broad support from Member States for this call.

As such, The Netherlands warmly welcomes the European Commission's response on this call by the Netherlands by starting the preparations for establishing a network of expertise on post COVID-19 which plan was presented in the Public Health Expert Group on the 3rd of February. A European network of expertise which enables the exchange of national and international experiences together on the prevalence, diagnosis, treatment, and management of post COVID-19 patients, and identifies and fills in knowledge gaps in research will have a high added value to what already happens at national level.

Therefore, The Netherlands calls all Member States to be ready to contribute to the network of expertise on post COVID-19 and to exchange their national experiences and expertise, where appropriate, and to link their national research agenda in particular with regard to biomedical and clinical research. The Netherlands welcomes these Member States which already have announced their participation to the network and take part in European research consortia in the framework of Horizon Europe.

To make a European network which also supports health care providers and patients properly, setting up an exchange of expertise mechanism at national level is a pre-condition. This could be established, for example by one or more indicated national centers of expertise which bring knowledge and experiences from practice in the field of post COVID-19 together and vice versa and at the same time could function as an active portal to the European network.

It is of importance that the Council of Health ministers express the need to take further actions and call upon Commissioner Kyriakides and Commissioner Gabriel to inform Member States, and keep them informed regularly, about the elaboration, progress,

appropriate funding and timelines of the announced network of expertise on post COVID-19 and any other actions.

Moreover, it is necessary that guidance to this network will be provided to let it function as effective as possible and to facilitate initiatives starting as soon as possible, making use of appropriate EU funding.

The Netherlands looks forward to work together with all Member States and the European Commission to create a meaningful, collaborative, and comprehensive effort to provide perspective to those suffering from post COVID-19.