The pandemic shows how closely health is linked to the economy, employment and wider issues. The EU works across all these areas and has tried to respond accordingly.

In just a few months, COVID-19 has fundamentally changed our world. It has triggered a public health, economic, and social crisis on an unprecedented scale. 6.3 million Europeans have been diagnosed with the virus, more than 200,000 have lost their lives and no country has been spared.

At the onset of the crisis, countries rushed to protect their citizens. Vital medicines and medical equipment ran short and supply chains broke down. The pandemic also demonstrated the huge impact health has on European life in its widest sense and on national economies. It took time and immense multilevel efforts for European countries to begin to support each other and work together. The European Union (EU) has been an important part of rebuilding this solidarity which is so critical to Europe’s response.

The EU mobilised all means at its disposal to help Member States (MS) tackle the pandemic and mitigate the socio-economic impact. It has implemented measures to support employment, businesses and society. In the specific area of health, it is helping strengthen national health system responses, in collaboration with the European Centre for Disease prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) through close coordination and cooperation with MS, through the Health Security Committee and other coordination bodies.

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The European Commission (EC) works in close coordination among all different services to align health and other perspectives: testing and distancing measures are a case in point.

As cases again increase rapidly, MS are taking steps to scale-up national test and trace capabilities – measures that are pivotal to reducing the spread of COVID-19. They are also re-implementing stringent non-pharmaceutical interventions (physical distancing, mask wearing, hand hygiene, limiting social contacts) and revisiting travel restrictions.

The Commission has agreed a Recommendation on COVID-19 testing strategies, including the use of rapid antigen tests, that sets out key considerations for national, regional or local testing strategies including scope, priority groups, and issues around testing capacity and resources. The EC is also seeking to support improved contact tracing, working with MS to ensure the tracing apps being launched by several EU countries are interoperable on a cross border level. National apps developed in Germany, Ireland and Italy are the first to be linked through the European interoperability gateway. Contact tracing is also facilitated by the Early Warning and Response System, which enables direct communication between MS and relevant EC services.

The Commission is also working with MS and across Directorates to arrest the increase in local transmission and sub-optimal adherence to the non-pharmaceutical measures. Its July Communication on Early Detection, Rapid Response & Protection of Vulnerable Groups, aimed to address the risk of new waves of the disease. On 24 September, the ECDC published further guidance reinforcing these essential measures.

No one in the Commission has any doubt – these measures are disruptive to the general well-being of people, the functioning of society, and the economy. They are being encouraged nevertheless as key to halting further widespread transmission and more, generalised lockdowns.

The EU has also worked with MS and other European agencies to facilitate a coordinated approach to travel measures by developing a common framework for mapping COVID-19 risk across countries (see Box 1).
The EC is also leveraging its ties to other European agencies to accelerate work on new treatments and therapeutics

The EC has worked very closely with the ECDC and the EMA to ensure a coordinated response across Europe and to accelerate work on new treatments and therapeutics for COVID-19. Together they seek to tackle bottlenecks, to better anticipate future shortages, and to assist in adapting production.

In response to national lockdowns, the EC exploited pre-existing Trans-European Transport Network crossings to introduce “Green lanes”. These facilitate the uninterrupted flow of goods across borders. The Commission has also worked with non-European countries to address export bans and to ensure the continued supply of vital pharmaceuticals.

No specific treatment for COVID-19 exists yet and the development of anti-viral treatments is typically lengthy and complex. The EMA and EC have put mechanisms in place to support the rapid development, assessment and authorisation of new medicines and vaccines. These accelerate the mandatory steps that determine whether and how fast one can move forward, while making sure that efficacy and safety is assessed using sufficiently robust data.

The Commission is also fostering the exploration of different approaches to therapeutics, such as repurposing existing, approved medicinal products; using antibody-rich blood plasma; and developing completely novel treatments. EMA has also provided scientific advice for more than 40 developers of potential treatments. Once new therapies have been established, the next challenges will be manufacturing capacity, production and large-scale procurement.

Box 1: Travel is just one area where the EU has used its position to support cross-sectoral efforts

Sector specific containment measures have been implemented, including in transport. At the beginning of the outbreak, most countries restricted travel and in some cases closed borders. As travel in the EU restarted, the Commission and relevant agencies have offered technical guidance.

- **Aviation Health Safety Protocol**: The European Aviation Safety Agency and the ECDC worked together on the production of measures that can be implemented by airlines and airports to protect passengers and crew. Similar guidance has been produced for other sectors.
- **Lifting travel restrictions**: MS discuss constantly, at the Council level, the epidemiological indicators and update the list of third countries for which travel restrictions should be lifted.
- **The Council Recommendation** adopted by Ministers on 13 October established common criteria and a common framework on travel measures in response to COVID-19. This is a step towards a more coordinated, predictable and transparent MS approach to travel restrictions. It is crucial to safely rebuilding the EU economy and creating the clarity and predictability needed for the smooth functioning of the internal market, while protecting citizens’ health.

The EC has also been used to ensure the production and supply of vaccines in the EU. In August, a first agreement was reached with the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca to purchase 300 million doses of a potential coronavirus vaccine (with the option for 100 million more), with provision to donate or re-direct vaccines to other European or low and middle-income countries. Two more agreements with Sanofi-GSK and Johnson and Johnson were signed in September and October. In addition, the Commission confirmed its participation in the COVAX Facility contributing €400 million to support equitable access to affordable COVID-19 vaccines everywhere, for everyone who needs them. The EU’s
work in the area of COVID-19 vaccines is explored further in the article by Greer, later in this issue.

**The Commission has established a Clearing House for medical equipment to facilitate timely availability of medical supplies**

In addition to the efforts above, the Commission has set up a COVID Clearing House for medical equipment (see Table 1). It gathers information on supply and monitors how supply matches demand from MS. The Clearing House serves as a platform for MS dialogue and information sharing and is a means to overcome shortages and build capacity, complementing EC work on joint procurement and stockpiling of medical equipment via rescEU.

It works closely with national authorities across the EU, the European Economic Area (EEA), Switzerland and the United Kingdom. It also encourages continuous dialogue with manufacturers and other stakeholders both at the level of industry associations and individual companies. This exchange of information is essential for a better understanding of the challenges faced by industry; to monitoring potential shortages of medical equipment; and to facilitate the matching of supply and demand. The Clearing House has provided legal, technical and regulatory support to industry, especially to new actors with no previous exposure to such a regulated area and has helped manage technical and regulatory obstacles and potential bottlenecks.

The Clearing House also monitors imports, export restrictions put in place by third countries, production capacity, and supply chains, including transport and logistics bottlenecks.

**An ambitious new EU4Health programme has been proposed to respond to COVID-19 and help build resilient and sustainable health systems**

The Commission proposed the EU4Health Programme (2021–2027) as part of an ambitious package in May. This new, stand-alone Health Programme responds to calls from EU citizens to have a more active role in health. It was intended to address the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic consequences, to tackle many of the challenges the pandemic uncovered and to be future-proof. Negotiations with the Council and the Parliament are ongoing. Key initiatives are on:

- Health crisis readiness and cross-border threats
- Cancer
- Health systems strengthening, including workforce training
- A European Health Data Space and digital improvements, and
- European Reference Networks

In addition to developing the EU4Health Programme, the European Council took bold action in July, reaching a landmark political agreement on a €1.82 trillion package for a sustainable and green recovery. The Next Generation EU and the Multiannual Financial Framework will address the dramatic costs of the pandemic, whilst making Europe greener, more digital and more resilient. The package includes €672.5 billion for the Recovery and Resilience Facility that will allow MS to mitigate the economic and social impact of the crisis and frontload reforms and investment around employment policies, skills development and social inclusion. It also has €47.5 billion for 2020/21 under REACT-EU which can support youth employment and social cohesion.

**The EU will continue to promote solidarity and unity across MS and beyond to meet the challenges posed by COVID-19 and to future-proof our health systems**

Epidemiological trends are worrying and there is already tangible evidence of infection rates spiralling out of control. EC actions so far have increased short term preparedness, but many challenges remain including the threat of a double epidemic (“twindemic”) of COVID-19 and influenza which would challenge health care providers even further. The EC is encouraging risk reduction including through promoting seasonal flu vaccination and is of course working for cooperation on potential COVID-19 vaccinations.

### Table 1: The Clearing House: mission, clusters and key EC collaborators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Clearing house aims to:</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Give an overview of MS essential needs for medical equipment</td>
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<td>• Facilitate the matching of supply and demand for medical equipment at EU level</td>
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<td>• Support MS, companies and other stakeholders in managing information flows and possible blocks to the supply chain</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Help provide information on the Emergency Support Instrument selection actions and their implications</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Contribute to Commission thinking on possible revision in Export Authorisation Regulations</td>
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<td>• Encourage the exchange of best practices among MS</td>
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**It has 5 product-related clusters:**

1. Personal protective equipment (PPE)
2. Medical devices (including ventilators)
3. Other hospital supplies
4. Tests
5. Medicines (including ICU therapeutics and vaccines)

**It brings together expertise and those fighting COVID-19 from across the EC:**

- SANTE
- GROW
- JRC
- TRADE
- ECHO
It is also using the crisis to learn more widely and to lever attention to improve crisis preparedness and to manage cross-border threats more effectively at both EU and MS level. The EU will continue to address the pandemic with extreme care and responsibility, with a view to:

- **Making sure health is a central part of Europe’s path to recovery:** The forward-looking EU4Health programme is a clear signal that the health of EU citizens is a priority. It reflects aspirations for a real step forward in how the EU deals with health. The Commission has the potential to help MS make their health systems more resilient so that high-quality health care is available to all.

- **Future proofing health systems and programmes and making the recovery agenda health-proof:** The EC will propose a stronger health threats framework and strive to reinforce and empower the EMA and ECDC – Europe’s centre for disease prevention and control – so that the EU is prepared for new health threats.

- **Promoting unity amongst citizens, MS and across agencies:** Continuing engagement and communication with citizens is ever more important as “isolation fatigue” threatens adherence to containment measures. People’s behaviour remains key in controlling the pandemic and the EC will endeavour to foster a sense of mutual commitment and unity. It will also work with MS to foster collective and collaborative responses. It will also align its Directorates and agencies and continue to work with the World Health Organization because the fragmentation of efforts makes all of Europe more vulnerable.

**References**

