Use of scientific findings by the FOPH during the coronavirus pandemic

Summary of the Report by the Parliamentary Control of the Administration for the National Council Control Committee

24 August 2022

Key terms



SARS-CoV-2

SARS-CoV-2, or the 'novel coronavirus', is the virus that causes COVID-19. It was behind the global coronavirus pandemic first identified in China at the end of 2019. The first case in Switzerland was confirmed on 25 February 2020.

Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force

The Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force (SN-STF) was set up on 30 March 2020 by members of the Swiss academic community from various scientific fields. It received a mandate from the Confederation to advise the public authorities during the coronavirus pandemic.





FOPH COVID-19 task force

The FOPH COVID-19 task force was established as the internal crisis management platform of the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH). It was launched on 23 January 2020 to monitor and study the propagation of the virus and to advise the Federal Council on prevention and control measures.

Peer review

By the end of March 2021, almost 140,000 scientific articles on the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 had already been peer-reviewed. Many more articles were also published online before undergoing formal peer review (preprints).



Main points in brief

The Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) made limited use of scientific findings in the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic although this subsequently improved over time. It had the necessary expertise at its disposal, despite not proactively building its scientific network. The scientific findings were not always explained transparently in the information provided as a decision-making basis and, in general, were rarely referred to in the FOPH's communications with the public.

As part of their audit of the federal authorities' handling of the coronavirus crisis, the Federal Assembly Control Committees tasked the Parliamentary Control of the Administration (PCA) in January 2021 with evaluating the FOPH's use of scientific findings during the pandemic.

In April 2021, the competent FDHA/DETEC sub-committee of the National Council Control Committee (CC-N) ruled that the evaluation should focus on the legal and strategic basis, the handling of the scientific findings on the novel coronavirus, and the inclusion of these findings in the Federal Council's decision-making information and in public communications. It was not the purpose of the evaluation to assess the expediency of the authorities' decisions, as these must take other factors into account beyond the scientific findings.

The PCA selected five transmission control measures from the initial stage of the pandemic (early 2020 to end-March 2021), i.e. mask-wearing and other restrictions, to investigate the extent to which scientific findings were taken into account. With the assistance of an epidemiologist, it compiled the specific findings that were available at various points in time. It then examined government documents and interviewed around 30 people from the FOPH and the scientific community. The content of public communications was analysed externally on behalf of the PCA. The main results of the evaluation are as follows:

There was no clearly defined process for involving the scientific community, which organised its own network

While the legal framework provides for scientific findings to be used in managing an epidemic, the strategic framework offers less clarity on how the scientific community should be involved (3.1). The Federal Commission for Pandemic Preparedness and Response (FCP) – the only existing body in this field at the time – was not mobilised, contrary to the terms of its appointment order (3.2). The FOPH did not proactively build up its scientific network; links with the scientific community were instead initiated by external actors such as the Swiss National COVID-19 Science Task Force (SN-STF) (3.3, 4.3). Moreover, the absence of defined processes meant that collaboration between public authorities and the scientific community was largely dependent on the specific individuals on both sides (4.3).

The FOPH improved its use of scientific findings over the course of the pandemic

It is precisely in times of crisis that normal structures are put to the test. There has been widespread recognition of the commitment and flexibility of those involved in tackling the pandemic, both within and outside the public administration (4.3). The

PCA notes that the use of scientific findings did improve over the course of the pandemic, in terms of collaboration between the FOPH and the scientific community (4.3) as well as in public communications (6.3).

Scientific expertise was sought from numerous channels, in some cases in duplicate

While the FOPH had access to scientific findings through various channels, no specific criteria had been identified to filter out the most relevant information (4.1). A number of duplicate requests were made to the scientific community (4.2), although the FOPH gradually adapted the specific role of individual actors over time (3.3). The SN-STF issued fewer recommendations as time went by, focusing instead on assessing the epidemiological situation and how it was evolving. This tended to blur the line between its specific role and that of other bodies (4.3).

The scientific findings were not always presented transparently in the information serving as a decision-making basis

The documents submitted to the Federal Council as a basis for decision-making were drafted in close cooperation between the FOPH and the General Secretariat of the Federal Department of Home Affairs (GS-FDHA), working under extreme time constraints. They contained extensive data on the evolution of the epidemiological situation in Switzerland but did not always clearly present the scientific findings as such (5.1). For instance, differences in opinions on mask-wearing were not explicitly mentioned in spring 2020 (5.2), and little attention was given to new findings on airborne transmission of the virus (5.3). This reflects the conflict that existed between having to act quickly while also taking account of scientific findings still subject to a degree of uncertainty.

Public communications, particularly from the FOPH, made little reference to the scientific findings

The external analysis of press releases and press conferences concludes that very little reference was made to scientific findings in public communications, despite the fact that most people surveyed by the PCA thought it was important to communicate information transparently and to explain the basis on which specific measures were being decided. In the communications analysed, the SN-STF referred consistently to the scientific basis, in keeping with its mandate as a scientific advisory body. The FOPH, however, rarely mentioned such findings, despite its role as a specialised agency to communicate on technical and scientific aspects (6.1, 6.3). For example, the FOPH did not proactively communicate the latest scientific findings on maskwearing even though it had substantially changed its opinion in this regard (6.2). Also, while the allocation of communication tasks within the administration was believed to be clear, this was not fully reflected in practice. Moreover, there was a lack of coordination between the administration and the SN-STF, particularly regarding the content of this communication (6.3).

The full report is available in French, German and Italian (www.parliament.ch).