



COVID-END global horizon-scanning panel February briefing note (Last updated 18 February 2021)

Current pandemic context

Confirmed COVID-19 cases are now over 110 million worldwide and COVID-19-attributed deaths have surpassed 2.5 million. While the number of new cases being identified daily is on a downward trend, several variants of concern have arisen and are taking hold in some countries. Over 188 million vaccination doses have been administered.

Potential issues for consideration from the scan

To inform panelists' deliberations about emergent issues (or previously missed long-term and recurring issues) that may need to be prioritized, the COVID-END team has prepared the following bulleted summary of issues identified through available documents (e.g., academic journals and magazines), websites (e.g., international organizations and traditional media), and social media (e.g., Twitter), which are organized using the four parts of the COVID-END taxonomy of decisions related to COVID-19.

1) Public-health measures

- Maintaining effective public-health measures, even in the face of declining case and hospitalization rates, given the emergence of variant strains

2) Clinical management of COVID-19 and pandemic-related conditions

- Accommodating shifting evidence about drug treatments

3) Health-system arrangements

- Ensuring an equitable allocation of vaccines across countries
- Understanding the reluctance of some countries to acquire vaccines and put in place a vaccine roll-out strategy
- Prioritizing racialized communities for vaccine roll-out in many Western countries due to the disproportionate COVID-19 impacts on these communities

4) Economic and social responses

- Articulating long-term, whole-of-government plans that use multiple policy levers to avoid future cycles of infections and lockdowns and provide economic security for citizens
- Implementing and strengthening paid leave policies to ensure workers have the economic security to isolate when exposed to or sick with COVID-19
- Considering how to promote children's resilience and recovery via social policy given children are facing significant challenges at present and will face the consequences of pandemic-related disruptions for years to come

The team has also prepared a more detailed appendix containing lists of hyperlinked descriptors of the issues addressed in identified documents, websites and social media (Appendix 1).

Potential top priorities for 'living' evidence syntheses where they are currently lacking

To inform panelists' deliberations about top priorities for 'living' evidence syntheses, we are sharing topics prioritized at the January 2021 panel meeting. Where appropriate, we have combined topics. We have also moved cross-cutting issues to the top of the list. New topics are highlighted in **blue**, topics for which we are aware of existing or planned living evidence syntheses are highlighted in **green**, and topics for which at least some evidence syntheses are available are highlighted in **yellow**.

Rank	Prioritized topics from panel
Cross-cutting	
1	Engaging vulnerable groups in society to develop and customize packages of public-health measures, clinical-management approaches, health-system arrangements, and economic and social responses that are sensitive to equity, diversity and inclusion considerations and that address inequalities in COVID-19 burden
2	Supporting coordination across government sectors and across non-governmental organizations, citizen groups, academia, and others, including ‘non-typical’ stakeholders (both in general and specifically to avoid future cycles of lockdowns and re-openings)
New	Optimizing packages of responses (public-health measures, health-system arrangements, and economic and social responses), including combinations of centralized and decentralized approaches, in terms of both their health benefits and their economic and social costs
New	Integrating data systems to support pandemic response
New	Understanding the transmission characteristics of SARS-CoV-2 variants and the implications for public-health measures (e.g., vaccine choice and sequencing, double masking, and quarantine length), clinical management (e.g., risk of severe disease and re-infection), and health-system arrangements (e.g., PPE, cohorting, and HVAC)?
New	Understanding the real-world vaccine effectiveness (in addition to trials data about safety and efficacy) and the implications for public-health measures (e.g., vaccine substitution and timing for second dose; changes to infection prevention and control measures) and health-system arrangements (e.g., PPE, cohorting, and HVAC)? <i>*** see health-system arrangements for vaccine roll-out ***</i>
Public-health measures	
1	Adapting strategies for testing that optimize the use of existing capacity and incorporating neighbourhood-based approaches like sewage testing to identify outbreaks
2	Supporting adherence to public-health measures , including addressing barriers to adherence (e.g., safe transportation to testing and vaccination sites, paid time off work, and publicly funded isolation facilities)
3	Understanding patterns in and consequences of the greater geographic dispersion of infections, including the role of internal and international migration and of tourism in transmission
4	Building rapid-response mechanisms to support interdisciplinary outbreak studies and addressing litigation and other concerns related to sharing information about outbreaks
Clinical management of COVID-19 and pandemic-related conditions	
1	Documenting and addressing long-haul symptoms of COVID (also known as ‘long COVID’) among people without severe COVID and/or long-term sequelae of severe COVID
2	Understanding the protective effects of antibodies (e.g., duration of protection) and the role of auto-antibodies in more severe illness
3	Screening for and managing emergent mental health and substance use issues and understanding the links between substance use and pandemic-related increases in domestic violence and suicide
4	Understanding COVID-19 as a ‘ syndemic ’ that co-occurs with a range of other communicable and non-communicable diseases that differentially affect population groups, and adjusting supports accordingly
New	Using pulse oximeters for home monitoring of patients
Health-system arrangements	
1	Optimizing vaccine roll-out , including securing and distributing a reliable supply of vaccines and ancillary supplies, allocating vaccines and ancillary supplies equitably, communicating vaccine-allocation plans and the safety and effectiveness of vaccines (and addressing the factors that contribute to vaccine hesitancy in particular population groups), administering vaccines in ways that optimize timely uptake, and surveillance, monitoring and evaluation, and reporting (including the documentation of vaccination status and adverse events)
2	Addressing in an agile way health worker shortages, motivation and wellbeing, including strategies to build resilience, manage burnout, and recruit and retrain staff

Rank	Prioritized topics from panel
3	Strengthening health-system governance (including by addressing corruption and avoiding the politicization of decision-making processes)
4	Leveraging primary care as the foundation for the health-system response to COVID-19
5	Strategic purchasing of supplies and equipment (e.g., personal protective equipment and liquid nitrogen for vaccine storage)
6	Consolidating and optimizing the value achieved through shifts in virtual care (including developing or updating of legal frameworks and policies)
7	Restoring non-COVID services after surges and addressing the effects of interrupted care on people with chronic conditions, including those with rare diseases
Economic and social responses	
1	Education - Benefits and risks to students, educators and families arising from school closures, re-openings, changes to operations and pedagogical innovations that can support ongoing education
2	Financial protection – Enhancing economic security by adjusting ‘safety nets’ (and keeping in mind differential impacts on women and other vulnerable populations) and enhancing workforce development (in healthcare as well as private businesses)
3	Food safety and security – Addressing food supply-chain challenges and food insecurity , including both community-based and nationally led actions
4	Economic development and growth – Embracing new approaches to public financing that support fairness and equity (especially for women and other vulnerable populations) while avoiding fiscal cliffs (expiring tax cuts and government spending cuts) and debt traps
5	Culture and gender – Understanding the additional risks of gender-based and domestic violence arising from restrictions and identifying appropriate ways to address such violence
6	Citizenship - Linking citizen and community participation in pandemic planning, policymaking and response with outcomes and capturing innovations in government approaches
7	Climate action – Maximizing the opportunity for synergies between the COVID-19 response and climate action , including exploring a ‘green recovery’
8	Transportation - Safely re-opening the tourism and travel industry and managing the related risks (e.g., through testing protocols) and spill-over effects on other countries (e.g., testing requirements before travel)
9	Economic development and growth – Understanding and addressing the impacts of the abrupt shift toward nationalism as a governing strategy for the economy
New	Community and social services - Promoting children’s resilience and recovery via social policy

Citation: Bullock HL, Sharma K, MacLean A, Al-Khateeb, Lavis JN. Potential issues for consideration and top priorities for living evidence syntheses where they are currently lacking. Hamilton, Canada: COVID-19 Evidence Network to support Decision-making about COVID-19 (COVID-END); 18 February 2021.

Appendix 1: Emergent issues (or previously missed long-term and recurring issues) for consideration, as identified from the monthly scan

1) Public-health measures

Theme	Effectiveness of public-health prevention and control measures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue
Taxonomy component	Infection prevention Infection control
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decreasing numbers of new COVID-19 cases and deaths around the world shows that public-health measures continue to be effective, however this does not suggest halting on prevention practices especially in the face of emerging variant strains. Link (Magazine – Forbes) The current decline of COVID-19 cases, including hospitalizations, in the United States could be due to effective behaviour changes in mask wearing and social distancing and successful vaccine rollouts for the health-care workers. Link (Magazine – The Atlantic)

2) Clinical management of COVID-19 and pandemic-related conditions

Theme	Clinical treatment of COVID-19 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue
Taxonomy component	Monoclonal antibodies
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bamlanivimab and etesevimab receive FDA emergency use authorisation for treatment for mild-moderate symptomatic patients to prevent hospitalisation and mortality Link (News – FDA website) EU now reviewing above antibody treatments Link (News – Reuters), but preprint studies claim new variants are less susceptible to treatment Link (Preprint – BioRxiv) Tocilizumab definitively shown to be effective at reducing mortality and hospital stay for patients with COVID-19, though cost is very high Link (News – Science)

Theme	Clinical treatment of COVID-19 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue
Taxonomy component	Other drugs
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Peginterferon lambda may prevent clinical deterioration when administered subcutaneously to SARS-CoV-2 positive patients Link (Journal – Lancet Respiratory Medicine) Small study in US shows fluvoxamine, a common and cheap SSRI, may reduce complications and even Long COVID; currently being studied in increasing numbers of trials globally Link (News – Science)

Theme	Clinical treatment of COVID-19 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on existing issue – new restrictions
Taxonomy component	Blood products - Convalescent plasma
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> FDA revises authorisation for use of convalescent plasma, states that only high-titer plasma can be used, and plasma transfer after severe symptoms have presented has no proven benefit Link (News – Medscape)

3) Health-system arrangements

Theme	Vaccine access and allocation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue – additional insights on global access and allocation and progress made to date
Taxonomy component	Service planning for COVID-19 treatment (<i>and prevention</i>)
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential prioritization challenges for vaccine allocation due to under-reporting/lack of effective reporting infrastructure for COVID-19 cases and deaths Link (News – Health Policy Watch) Challenges in ensuring global access to COVID-19 vaccines: production, affordability, allocation, and deployment Link (Journal – The Lancet) Progress is being made toward more equitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines globally though the COVAX initiative fund raising and purchase agreements now in place with vaccine manufacturers Link (Social media – Centre for Science in the Public Interest)

Theme	Widespread vaccination reluctance <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New issue
Taxonomy component	Future possible public-health measures – vaccination (susceptibility reduction)
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The risk of countries choosing not to vaccinate their population could result in sustained community spread of COVID-19 and potential mutations into aggressive strains that will be more difficult to contain; as some countries wait for access to vaccines, public-health measures that are known to mitigate COVID-19 spread should continue to be enforced. Link (Website - The Conversation)

Theme	Equitable distribution of vaccine <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue
Taxonomy component	Future possible public-health measures – vaccination (susceptibility reduction)

Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The next phase of Canada’s vaccine rollout of priority groups needs to consider equitable representation of adults from racialized communities or groups that have disproportionately impacted by COVID-19. Link (Newspaper - The Toronto Star)
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4) Economic and social responses

Theme	Long-term planning to avoid cycles of infection and lockdown <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue – Clarifying the trade-offs between, and interconnectedness of, public-health measures (such as lockdowns) and economic productivity across a wide range of outcomes
Taxonomy component	Economic development and growth – economic resilience
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A long-term, holistic COVID-19 management strategy, involving measures ranging from vaccination to international travel restrictions, is needed for the UK to return to ‘normal’. Link (News – The Scotsman) In light of the significant challenges faced by the UK so far during the pandemic, a multi-sectoral and whole of government plan that involves public health measures, vaccination, travel restrictions, and economic revitalization is needed to prevent further waves of infections and lockdowns. Link (News – The Guardian)

Theme	Paid leave policies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elaboration on an existing issue – enhancing economic security by adjusting ‘safety nets’ (and keeping in mind differential impacts on women and other vulnerable populations) and enhancing workforce training
Taxonomy component	Employment – worker supports
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public health leaders in Ontario have come together to urge the provincial government to bolster paid sick leave supports to enable workers to self-isolate when necessary due to illness or potential exposure. Link (News – CP24) A paid family and medical leave policy has been proposed in the US Congress and garnered significant support; both temporary and permanent paid leave proposals are currently being talked about in the US and they have the potential to reduce inequities and improve economic security. Link (News – The Guardian)

Theme	The long-term well-being of children <ul style="list-style-type: none"> New issue
Taxonomy component	Children and youth services
Source(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the pandemic and into the post-pandemic future, children are suffering from (and will continue to suffer from) increased poverty, educational loss, family stress, and a greater need for supports; dealing with these ongoing challenges will require a significant social policy response, and in this report a ‘Framework for Achieving the Well-Being of Children in the post-COVID-19 Decade’ is proposed. Link (Report – OECD Policy Responses)