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Pandemic lessons: what has Switzerland learnt?

The Confederation and cantons are writing up Switzerland's handling of the pandemic in various reports. There is a lot of self-congratulatory language, some critical remarks, and one glaring blind spot.

SUSANNE WENGER

No nationwide Covid-19 protective measures have been in place in Switzerland since the end of March. The only reaction by authorities to the unexpected Omicron wave this summer was to recommend that people over 80 reinforce their vaccination protection against severe infections with a second booster, which was proof that Switzerland is keeping to its comparatively restrained course of action. Back in the spring, Health Minister and Social Democratic Federal Councillor Alain Berset had already been quick to pat himself on the back as he answered a journalist's question about Switzerland's Covid-19 track record with "Where other than Switzerland would you have wanted to live during the pandemic?" Nevertheless, Berset promised that the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis would be "unsparingly" investigated.

Good marks, critical remarks

Since then, various reports have been published by the Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH), the Federal Chancellery, parliamentary commissions, and the Conference of Cantonal Governments. Overall, the government's pandemic management receives good marks in these publications. The experts commissioned by the FOPH state in their evaluation that "the federal government and the cantons reacted appropriately on the whole, and, with a few exceptions, in a timely manner to the threat posed by Covid-19". However, there are also critical remarks in the analyses. The Swiss crisis organisation in particular was considered to be inadequate. The authorities were also viewed as



Federal Councillor Alain Berset, pictured here at a meeting with hospital staff in Neuchâtel in 2020, promised an "unsparing" review of Switzerland's Covid-19 policy. Photo: Keystone

being insufficiently prepared, e.g. in stocking up on protective masks.

Further findings include the need for the federal government and the cantons to cooperate better in a pandemic situation, and for clarification regarding the involvement of the scientific community. Questions are also raised concerning individual measures implemented to combat the spread of the virus, namely the school closures in spring 2020 and the isolation of elderly people in care facilities. Conspicuous by its absence is any commentary on the low point of the Swiss approach in autumn/winter 2020. Disagreement between the various levels of government led to the authorities initiating measures relatively late, and with no vaccines available yet at that time, there was a temporary marked rise in excess deaths. A large percentage of the more than 13,000 confirmed Covid deaths

in Switzerland to date took place during this phase of the second wave.

This fatal hesitation is only mentioned in passing in the FOPH report. So far, no one other than the president of the Conference of Cantonal Health Directors, Basel politician for the Centre party Lukas Engelberger, has expressed any regret with regard to the review. The lower vaccination rates in Switzerland compared to other Western European countries have not been addressed yet either.

The reports list recommendations, most of which are aimed at improving crisis management structures. It remains to be seen which changes will actually be incorporated into the Epidemics Act and the national pandemic plan. Voices in parliament and the media have already warned that practical lessons truly must be learned from this review – or it will be an exercise in futility.