## EHFG 2014: Prestigious European Health Award goes to Mediterranean project to counteract cross-border threats to health

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*Health threats do not respect political borders. To avoid or contain their spread, countries need to have cross-border adequate surveillance and early warning systems in place to ensure an effective management of health events. The EpiSouth Plus Project was a three-year project building upon the network of 27 EU and non-EU countries of the Mediterranean Region, established by the previous project EpiSouth, set up to share the burden of disease control with a focus on environmental and epidemiological commonalities. This innovative project is the winner of the renowned European Health Award at the European Health Forum Gastein.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 3 October 2014** – This year’s European Health Award and its 10,000 euros cash prize went to the EpiSouth Plus Project. This Mediterranean initiative coordinated by the Italian National Institute of Healht (ISS), National Centre for Epidemiology, Surveillance and Healht promotion, is aimed at increasing health security in the Mediterranean Area and Balkans by enhancing preparedness to threats that can affect health security and to bio-security risks at national and regional levels in the framework of the implementation of international health regulations (IHR). It won out over five other cross-border initiatives that were also nominated for the renowned award of the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG).

“The risk posed by global threats in the bio-field is growing. To fulfil their public health mission, States must not only exert a continuous monitoring of their population’s health, but also set up a capacity to identify health risks emerging internationally that can affect their population”, said Dr Massimo Fabiani from ISS who accepted the award on behalf of the EpiSouth Network: “I would like to thank the European Health Forum Gastein for this important acknowledgement. I would also like to thank DG SANCO, the Executive Consumers, Health and Food Executive Agency for Health and DG DEVCO/EuropeAid for having co-funded the project together with the participating national partner institutions and the Italian Ministry of Health.” This allowed the consolidation of the EpiSouth Network, which was created in 2006 with nine EU countries in South-Europe and was then rapidly enlarged to also include 18 non-EU Mediterranean countries in North Africa, Middle East and Balkans. “We are very proud to receive this award and to share this success with the 80 Country Focal Points and 33 Country Lab Focal Points who made it possible with their commitment and professionalism”, the expert said.

Building upon a network of 27 EU and non-EU Countries established by the previous project EpiSouth (2006-2010), EpiSouth Plus established, among others, a Mediterranean Regional Laboratories network, promoted common procedures for Generic Preparedness and Risk management, installed a Mediterranean Early Warning Systems and developed interoperability with other Early Warning Systems. The project has also produced guidelines and a strategic document based on assessments and surveys aimed at facilitating WHO IHR implementation.

“The project is of particular importance for strengthening preparedness to health threats, health security and bio-security, also outside the EU“, EHFG President Prof Helmut Brand said in his praise of the project. “The achievements of EpiSouthPlus are an eloquent example that in the field of public health, cross-border cooperation is not just useful but in many cases such as these, simply indispensable.”

**About the European Health Award**

The European Health Award honours projects and initiatives that are helping to improve health care in Europe. The main criteria are that more than one European country has to be involved in a project and that the results must be transferable to other states and directly benefit a substantial part of the population or relatively large patient groups. The award is supported by the Austrian Ministry of Health and by FOPI, which brings together Austria's research-based pharmaceutical and biotechnology companies.

Dr Clemens-Martin Auer, jury member and representative of the Austrian Ministry of Health, sees the cooperation of the Mediterranean countries to control, combat and document infectious diseases as significant contribution for health security in the participating countries and in the EU as a whole. “The epiSouth-plus project has – not least because of the cooperation with the ECDC and WHO – a high level of professionalism and with the financial contribution of the European Commission the background to act effective and sustainable”, says Dr Auer.

„With the European Health Award FOPI once more supports European health projects. The changing life conditions and appearing health burdens are ever more challenging for countries with a massive effect on their respective health system. And in times of the ‘global village’, diseases – especially of an infectious kind – do not stop due to country boarders. One key step to address these changing life conditions is the multinational collaboration in research and development of innovations in medicine and pharmacy. The winning project demonstrates very well, that scientific collaboration beyond countries helps to address pressing health problems”, explains Mag. Ingo Raimon, president of the R&D based industry association FOPI.

Six cross-border health projects had been short-listed for the prestigious European Health Award 2014 which was instituted in 2007 by Prof Dr Günther Leiner, Honorary President and founder of the EHFG. They cover topics such as management of psychotic disorders, TB, perinatal health, pharmacovigilance, threat preparedness and Sudden Cardiac Death Syndrome. A panel of leading health experts chose the winner of the prize.

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