

# Special Interest – Media Info

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## 5th EUROPEAN HEALTH FORUM GASTEIN –

On the Future of Health in Europe  
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### **Anthrax ante portas – Are European Health Systems ready for the fight?**



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*„Bioterrorism confronts us with completely new threats“, said George Gouvras of the European Commission Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection. Biological and chemical warfare are nothing new, but “now civilians are targets too“, explains the expert for health protection. Although there has been no anthrax attack in Europe so far, Gouvras pleads for precaution measures, because neither the terrorists nor their plans are fully known until now. Since November 2001, a team of experts works on a program to prepare EU Member States for all eventualities of an emergency. George Gouvras reported at the 5<sup>th</sup> European Health Forum Gastein about how the population of the EU is going to be protected from anthrax & Co in the future.*

Succeeding in the war against bioterrorism means imagining the apocalypse. And to develop effective strategies to face the horror scenarios. This is the first step, which is supposed to be implemented by the anti-bioterror-program of the EU, BICHAT (program on preparedness and response to biological and chemical agent attacks). BICHAT is the result of a resolution, passed by the Health Security Committee (HSC), a council of high health politicians of all EU Member States and the Member of the EU Commission for Health and Consumer Protection, David Byrne, two month after the terror attack on the NY Twin Towers. BICHAT is planned to be implemented in theory as well as practically by the end of 2003.

#### **Worst Case Scenario fantasies**

What is the first step on the way to an efficient strategy against bioterror? „Currently we are developing various pessimistic scenarios of bio-attacks“, described George Gouvras at the 5<sup>th</sup> European Health Forum Gastein one aspect of his work. How could an attack look like? What is the maximum number of victims? What measures can be taken, if biological or chemical agent is spread in a soccer arena? What, if in several places simultaneously? The experts of BICHAT work on a number of solutions for a number of different threat scenarios. Besides the tracing back of epidemics, the main duty of BICHAT is to coordinate and adjust national disaster control plans to each

other and to ensure, in case of an emergency, the necessary coordination as well as the fast and secure flow of information. "We have developed early warning systems, which sound the alarm in all crucial institutions of the EU within the shortest possible time", Gouvras explains. Enabling all EU Member States to start preventive measures, to order the support of experts, to coordinate the analysis of samples in specialized laboratories and, last but not least, to intensify the contact among all cooperating institutions, is essential for a successful battle against the invisible enemy. Fast exchange of information in case of a bioterror attack has to work with or without telecommunication. In case the air traffic collapses, as it happened after 11 September, alternative means of transport have to be available. The CEE countries are informed about the EU measures in the scope of BICHAT, but are not actively integrated in the program yet. There are still real borders, which can be closed or better controlled in case of an emergency, the BICHAT-expert claims, whereas in the free market within EU-boundaries people, animals and plants can fluctuate freely. This means an increased danger, due to the speed with which the agent can spread.

### **Day and night readiness for duty**

The alarm system has to work „seven days a week, 24 hours a day“, Gouvras continues describing the program. It is essential, that at all times a sufficient number of experts is available, in order to face an attack. "Every physician has to know where to report a suspicion." BICHAT aims at establishing a exhaustive network of experts: physicians, for instance, who are specialized on the treatment of rare diseases, or laboratory assistants, who are able to distinguish between hundreds of different anthrax spores. Crucial weak spot in the alarm system seems to be the micro-biological diagnostic, which reduces the chances for recovering for the patients and makes a realistic classification of the agent quite difficult.

### **Medication in stock**

Another goal of the BICHAT program is the establishing of medication depots, which allow permanent access internationally. These depots should additionally help fighting animal epidemics like the foot-and-mouth disease or swine fever. The EU will not finance the depots, but supports further training of special forces as well as additional scientific research. "In the US, a new smallpox vaccination, which is planned to be distributed in case of an emergency in the US, had been developed according to the latest technical developments", mentioned Gouvras as an impressive example. Furthermore it was important to set standards. Until recently, there were no common behavioural guidelines, no closer definitions regarding the protection equipment or vaccinations for helpers. By the end of 2003, the BICHAT-program has to be fully implemented. In some points the target of the EU commission has already been carried out: the pharmaceutical industry has sufficient production capacities for antibiotics in the case of an emergency.