



Pandemic Prevention in Europe Still Flawed

- **International cooperation is often mere talk**
- **Vague areas of competency for European and international organisations**
- **Deficiencies in individual countries open “gateways” for pandemics**

A year after bird flu reached European countries and caused fear, from the threat of pandemic at that time there have been substantial consequences drawn. Improvements have been made concerning pandemic prevention and the structures for battling pandemics – but not enough yet. Leading international experts at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG) highlight that whilst advances have been made in a wide range of areas – European countries have only come halfway.

At the EHFG a study was presented by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, one of the most renowned research institutes for epidemics and pandemics. In it the study’s author, Richard Coker, points out several weaknesses:

- **Lack of coordination between human medical and veterinary measures:** in many national crisis plans potentially necessary veterinary measures are not sufficiently considered. As a result, the fight against one of the most important avenues for the spread of pandemics is neglected.
- **International cooperation is often mere talk:** while basically all national crisis plans contain clear declarations favouring close international cooperation – only a few have lined up plans as to how this international cooperation will even take place. As a result, in an emergency, cooperation will function only on a very limited basis.
- **Unsuitable strategies for containing potential pandemics:** many countries seem to assume that pandemic risks originate only abroad. There is a lack of sufficient strategies for the early combat of epidemics with pandemic potential which break out inside the country.
- **Vaguely formulated crisis plans:** critical factors are missing from many crisis plans. An example of this is the provision of vaccines. All plans recognize this as one of the key issues, but there is a lack of any developed plan concerning how the rapid and adequate production of vaccines can be ensured in the event of a pandemic – the same is also true for the fast provision of laboratory capacities for the development of new medications and vaccines.

A positive assessment was given to the practical implementation of measures in the event of actual pandemics, which was reviewed in the form of a comprehensive practical test in 25 EU member states as well as Switzerland, Norway and Iceland. Jonathan van Tam, pandemic expert at the Health Protection Agency (UK), said that the necessary measures were carried out in a generally efficient and coordinated way. The problems which emerged during the test (for example, poorly functioning telephone conferences, insufficiently equipped crisis centres) can be eliminated at little expense.

On the other hand, Van Tam criticized some national crisis plans for having left international issues largely untouched as well as highlighting a lack of clarity of rules between international organizations, particularly the WHO, the European Commission and the ECDC (European

Centre for the Prevention and Control of Disease). Van Tam has also demanded a binding checklist for national crisis plans.

EHFG President Günther Leiner is only partially satisfied with what has been achieved so far. As long as the danger of pandemic was still clearly remembered, several measures were taken; but, they often went only halfway.

Pandemic prevention is a pan-European responsibility which is only effective if every country pulls together. “It doesn’t help if individual countries initiate perfect defensive measures when others are remiss. Even if only a few countries fail to implement adequate measures, then there is a gateway for pandemics to enter Europe, which is ultimately a danger for every other country as well. Thus, it is a European responsibility to see to it that maximum security is created everywhere on a national level. If this is not done, we’re ultimately playing with the lives of citizens.”

EHFG – Press Office, Mag. Thomas Brey, info@mbdialog.at
Tel.: + 43 (0) 64 32 / 3393 / 237, Mobile: +43 (0) 676 / 542 39 09

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