



EHFG 2011: “DOCTORS AT THE HEART OF STOPPING MEASLES” SAYS HEAD OF EUROPEAN CENTRE FOR DISEASE PREVENTION AND CONTROL

Speaking to the press today, Dr Marc Sprenger, head of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Stockholm, said Europeans’ failure to get at least 95% of their children vaccinated against measles had resulted in an epidemic in the EU which had also spread to North and Central America. Dr Sprenger urged “sometimes indolent” doctors to take responsibility and make sure children were vaccinated twice: “People may not trust politicians, but they do trust doctors and nurses.”

Bad Hofgastein, October 6, 2011 – a failure to achieve at least 95% of children vaccinated against measles over the last two years has led to the re-emergence again in Europe, Dr Marc Sprenger, head of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in Stockholm told an EHFG press conference today. There were now nearly 30,000 cases in the EU, of whom 25% needed hospitalisation – “it’s not just a harmless childhood disease” – and 1% would suffer encephalitis (an infection of the brain). So far this year 30 people had died of an illness which had previously been more or less eradicated. The WHO had hoped to eliminate measles by 2010; the date had now been moved back to 2015, he said.

In part Dr Sprenger blamed rumour-mongering on the Internet against MMR vaccines often inspired on a report published in the respected London medical journal *The Lancet* by Andrew Wakefield, a British surgeon and medical researcher who has since been struck off. His report based on a fraudulent 1998 research paper, suggested a non-existent link between the vaccine for measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) vaccine, and autism and bowel disease. “We know now that we have to use the Internet too,” said Dr Sprenger, a physician and health professional who took over at the Centre in April last year. He said he and his colleagues had, since May, systematically used Twitter and other social media to spread the word about their work, and to counter false rumours. “You have to go to that level,” he said. “It also means a change of mindset. The message must be maximum 140 characters. It’s a complete change of mindset for many of us, but a necessary one.” The Centre held a meeting every day to monitor rumours and information traffic about contagious diseases.

But his main message at Gastein was to GPS to make sure children were vaccinated – “and twice,” he said. “It has to be twice.” It was safe, painless, and free. Coverage had to be at least 95%. The problem was that those who were not vaccinated were not evenly distributed. Vaccination rates were low among the Roma and others on the margins of society, he said. There were also those who opposed vaccination on principle, such as a certain orthodox Protestant sect in the Dutch “Bible Belt”. It is known that the vaccination rate among those is low”. “The same communities where polio appeared twenty years ago,” Dr Sprenger said.

He said he was now concerned with so-called vector diseases including West Nile Virus taking root in warmer parts of Europe, notably Italy and Spain - like measles this can result in brain infections - and malaria in Greece. The solution to these problems was not as simple as vaccinating against measles, he said. "This problem could be related to climate change. We and the WHO have been investigating. But malaria in Greece is not a big problem for the moment because it has, thankfully, not spread to tourist areas and there only a few cases, but ECDC will continue to follow this closely."

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the EU. This year it attracted more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries for discussions on the latest developments in health care policy.

EHFG Press Conference "Innovative answers to demographic challenges". 6 October 2011; EHFG Forum 3: "The future of medicine – developing an infrastructure for personalised medicine". 6 and 7 October 2011

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