



EHFG 2011: PLUGGING THE GAPS IN EUROPE'S HEALTH SECURITY

Professionals back EU-wide action on cross-border health emergencies: A new cross-border Health Security initiative should refine EU preparations for, and response to, health crises ranging from terrorist attacks to SARS epidemics, experts reported at the European Health Forum Gastein. If Europe was to be serious about facing up to major threats a real change of mind-set was of the essence, according to specialists.

Bad Hofgastein, October 5, 2011 -- If Europe is to be serious about facing up to major threats to public health, “a real change of mind-set” is of the essence, Karoline Fernández de la Hoz, Head of Coordination of the Public Health Directorate at Spain's Health Ministry, said following a workshop on a new cross-border Health Security initiative proposed by the European Commission. This topic is currently being discussed at the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG). The need for better international cooperation applied not just when there was a serious threat to public health, “but just as important, when there is a way of averting such dangers,” she said.

In charge of coordinating Spanish public health issues at international level, and one of the speakers at today's meeting, Dr Fernández de la Hoz said it should hardly be necessary to re-state the obvious that health crises did not stop at national borders.

Recent history, such as confusion in the handling of epidemics such as that of E. Coli last spring, showed there were still important lessons to be learnt and areas that needed attention “such as how we communicate threats”. Even now not everyone understood the implications of cross-border threats to health. There is a need for a real willingness to share information, and to follow best practice wherever it was found, she said.

The workshop heard that most health stakeholders who responded to the European Commission's EU-wide questionnaire this spring on a new Health Security initiative had taken a positive attitude to the Commission's plans. The questionnaire was sent to national, regional and local authorities, health institutions, and members of the EU Health Policy Forum, international organizations, NGOs, and enterprises and interest groups.

The EU Health Security initiative aims to prepare for, and react promptly to, health crises such as epidemics and pandemics, and major biological, chemical, and environmental incidents. This will involve encouraging and pulling together national preparedness for all cross-border health threats, and ensuring up-to-date and reliable information is available to policy-makers and decision-makers.

The cross-border threats the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Consumer Policy (DG SANCO) has in mind are, for instance, the influenza pandemic H1N1 in 2009, or SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003, both potentially fatal for large numbers of people. A coordinated public health approach at EU level was needed,

according to a Commission's spokesperson, building on existing preparedness and response planning and a strong risk and crisis management framework.

The initiative falls within the EU competence granted under the Lisbon Treaty in 1998: ways of expanding capacity and creating more flexible health security structures at both national and European level are also being explored. An essential part of this will be an "accurate, transparent and rapid communication strategy," the Commission said.

Speakers at today's workshop represented stakeholders, Member States through the Health Security Committee, the World Health Organisation, and the Global Health Security Initiative.

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.

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