



Consumer Voice

Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection

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◀ David Byrne,
Commissioner for
Health and Consumer
Protection

Belgian Presidency, July to December 2001

Holding the rotating EU Presidency is usually seen by the Member States as a tremendous challenge. And, it is indeed challenging, bringing with it increased work loads for the government concerned. However it is also an opportunity to bring a particular flavour to the work of the institutions. Each country makes the most of its own individuality, stamping the agenda proceedings with the atmosphere that is special to the Member State holding the Presidency.

In this edition, we highlight Belgium's contribution to health and consumer protection issues in the institutions during the months from July to December when the Belgian Government holds the Presidency of the Council.

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Belgian Presidency confident of EFA start up in 2002

Minister Magda Aelvoet has a very clear and concise vision of what she hopes to achieve on health and consumer protection issues during the six months of the Belgian Presidency. "Our first public health priority for the Belgian Presidency is to ensure food safety and the best means to do this is to ensure the work is completed by the Council that will see the European Food Authority (EFA) go ahead in 2002," she explained to Consumer Voice.

Considerable momentum built up on EFA during the Swedish Presidency. However, there remain differences between the Council and the Commission on the composition of the board. But Minister Aelvoet is undeterred. "When I met with Commissioner Byrne and discussed this, we realised the positions of the Council and Commission are not that far from each other. We are confident we will start the EFA in 2002," she said.

Undaunted by the large number of amendments put forward by the European Parliament to the proposals, the Minister is working on how the Presidency can integrate them into the new legal text.

Belgium will encourage progress on blood safety improvements

Minister Aelvoet is particularly anxious to achieve a good common position in Council, on the blood safety directive. This is currently in negotiation in the institutions (See page 2) but as a "highly sensitive issue", it will have a fair wind from the Presidency to ensure its swift passage to completion. Although this is a priority, the Belgian Presidency is also firmly behind the other Commission proposals on public health that are on their way through the institutions at the moment.

Moving easily from the agenda for the Presidency to the national Belgian agenda, Minister Aelvoet spoke with great enthusiasm of initiatives currently underway in Belgium and how they can feed into the EU experience through the Presidency. Both, she believes, can learn from each other.



▲ Minister for Public Health, Consumer Protection, Environment and Animal Welfare, Magda Aelvoet, President of the Council meetings dealing with health and consumer protection issues during the Belgian Presidency.

Mental health in the 21st century

Not content to simply support initiatives already underway, Minister Aelvoet will raise new issues for consideration. One is particularly close to her heart - the issue of mental health. "I regard mental health to be a very big challenge for the 21st century," she said. "We have seen the World Health Organisation (WHO) report on the increase in diseases of mental health so we intend to put this on the European agenda and will hold a conference on it in October. Then we will be in a good position to come up with good conclusions by the end of the Presidency."

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Stop Press

As Consumer Voice goes to press, the College of Commissioners deliberate two new proposals on GMOs. One addresses the question of the traceability of GMOs and GM food and feed and the second is a proposal concerning the authorisation and labelling of GM food and feed.

For the most up-to-date information on these proposals please go to: <http://europa.eu.int/rapid/start/cgi/midday.htm>

"At the end of last year, we launched a campaign [in Belgium] on moderate use of antibiotics," she said. "The response was immediate and we have seen a reduction in the use of antibiotics throughout Belgium. The strong response from the public and physicians made it possible to analyse findings." As a follow-up to the Swedish Presidency discussions on antibiotics, Belgium will share its experience of this initiative with the other Council members and hopes to see a recommendation on it adopted by the Council of Ministers in November.

Consumers as equal partners in the internal market

Minister Aelvoet wants consumers to be equal partners in the market and to strengthen their influence. This idea was first discussed earlier this year during the Swedish Presidency, when an informal meeting was held in Lund between Council ministers and consumer non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Belgium decided to take it further by holding a conference on the subject next October.

On this too, Belgium is working in cooperation with the Commission, the Member States and consumer NGOs. The conference will discuss the directive on safety of products, the role of consumer organisations, new areas of the market that need consumer protection - for example e-commerce - ethical consumption and sustainable consumption. The conference will produce a report that will be submitted to the Council of Ministers in November.

EP Environment Committee adopts report on Commission Proposal for safe blood and blood products

On 11 July, the Environment Committee of the European Parliament (EP) adopted a draft report on the Commission proposal for a directive setting high standards to safeguard blood and blood products. The discussion and vote in committee were in preparation for the full plenary session in September when the EP will take a final decision on the 87 amendments that were agreed.

The amendments show a high level of consensus between the Commission and the EP. The aim of the measures proposed by the Commission is to ensure comprehensive binding standards for blood and blood products from donor to patient. It also safeguards clear standards for all blood regardless of its final use, including related medical applications.

Discussion was animated during the meeting and there was much to consider. One area that received particular attention was how blood should be donated. The availability of blood and blood components used for therapeutic purposes, depends on citizens who are prepared to donate blood.

The Commission proposal sets out clear guidelines on how this should be done in a way that safeguards public health and prevents the transmission of infectious diseases. It lists measures, including precautionary measures, that should be taken during the collection, processing and distribution of blood and blood products.

There is currently a shortage of blood and blood components in the EU Member States. In the case of plasma in particular, a huge proportion must be found through imports. Whole human blood or blood components are needed for transfusions or can become the starting materials for manufacturing medicinal products derived from plasma.

■ Encouraging blood donors

The EP wants to draw attention to the voluntary nature of blood contributions in the EU, pointing to the current shortage of donations. One amendment urged the Commission and the Member States to promote campaigns and initiatives that would encourage donations and ensure that donors gain greater public recognition. They are also concerned that appropriate measures should be taken to prevent blood and blood derivatives from being illegally sold in any way.

The Commission wants high standards to prevail that will apply to all stages in the transfusion chain, from collection to testing, processing, storage and distribution. There must be guarantees on the suitability of donors, blood establishments and the equipment used, including a system of traceability of blood from donor to recipient.

The proposal for a directive setting standards for the collection, testing, processing, storage and distribution of human blood and blood components, is the first proposal for a directive in the public health area, under the new powers included in Article 152 of the EC Treaty. You can find the full text, including all the annexes, at: http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph/others/safety_blood/index_en.htm

Commissioner David Byrne receives Lung Foundation Award

In recognition of his personal and political commitment to tobacco control, Commissioner David Byrne received the first ever Lung Foundation Award on 9 July. Explaining why the Commissioner was chosen, Professor Chyaris Roussos, President of the Council of the European Lung Foundation said, "Tobacco is a major cause of lung disease and David Byrne's strong commitment to tobacco control results in greatly strengthened EU legislation and improved health protection measures for European citizens." From now on, the award will be an annual event.

To find out more about the Commission proposal for a directive on tobacco advertising and sponsorship, go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/press/press144_en.html

Winners of the 2000-01 European Young Consumers' Competition travel to Berlin

A total of 34 000 schoolchildren from all over Europe took part in the competition to find out how young consumers would promote a balanced diet. In the end it was a Spanish school that carried off the first prize and travelled to Berlin to receive it. The team from the school Miguel Herrero Pereda in Torrelavega near Santander, threw themselves into the project with great enthusiasm and excelled in their efforts.

They prepared breakfast in class and gave out healthy snacks to their schoolmates during breaks. They took part in a radio programme about young people's eating habits, organised a conference on food and hygiene and wrote a book on how food has been portrayed by artists through history from prehistoric times. And as if that was not enough, they produced a poster, a booklet and a video promoting healthy food.

In all, 2 277 school teams with around 15 pupils in each team took part in the competition, making it a record year. All of them came up with interesting and well-prepared projects and it was difficult to judge. Nevertheless, there were other teams that excelled. The Alexander-von-Humboldt school in Bayreuth, Germany won second prize and the Amaroussion school near Athens in Greece won third prize. The High School in Clonmel, County Tipperary in Ireland won a special Young Jury Prize of EUR 1 000.

Food safety in action

The Commission's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) published a report in July on national and EU coordinated pesticide residue monitoring programmes carried out during

■ Blood donors' privacy

The proposal also looks at what measures need to be taken to provide prospective donors of blood or plasma with assurances of confidentiality on any health-related information that they give to authorised personnel. It ensures confidentiality of the test results and any future traceability of their donation.

Participate in the policy

- Call for tender for an information campaign to prevent nicotine addiction in adolescents: http://europa.eu.int/comm/dgs/health_consumer/library/tenders/call28_en.pdf
- Call for proposals for actions within the new public health programme: <http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph/programmes/call/callprops.htm>

A worrying trend

Despite the increase in the numbers of samples discovered to have no detectable pesticide residues at all, the increase in the number of samples that exceed MRLs indicates a worrying trend. National monitoring programmes revealed that 4.3% of samples exceeded the MRL as did 8.7% of the samples tested through the coordinated programmes.

The report concludes that in a proportion of fresh food, statutory limits are not respected as the comparison with previous years show an increase in the number of samples containing residues that exceed the MRL. This could be due to special problems that occurred during 1999 with chlormequat residues in pears and methamidophos residues in peppers. Because all the authorities were aware of this likelihood, testing targeted these problems directly. This practice is to be encouraged as it ensures that suspected problem areas are subjected to close scrutiny.

■ Most common pesticides

The most commonly detected pesticides are: thiabendazole, iprodione, chlorpyrifos, endosulfan, imazalil, procymidone and the benomyl group.

NEXT EDITION

As so many people are on holiday during August, the next Consumer Voice newsletter will be published in September, when legislative work of the Institutions resumes.

1999. In almost two-thirds of the samples taken, no pesticide residues were detected. In the remaining 32%, the residues were within the maximum residue limit (MRL) set by legislation. The report also finds an increase- up to 4.3% in comparison with previous years from 1996 - 1999 - in the numbers of samples with pesticide residues that exceed the MRL.

To ensure that excessive pesticide residues do not find their way on to the tables of European consumers, Member States are required to ensure compliance with MRLs by carrying out random checks. This is done through national monitoring programmes in all fifteen Member States with Norway and Iceland taking part.

In addition, through a special EU wide programme coordinated by the Commission in cooperation with the Member States, very specific monitoring programmes are undertaken although enforcement of any measures is carried out by the relevant Member State if samples exceeding the permitted level of pesticide are found.

In this coordinated programme the Commission defines the most important pesticide-crop combinations in a multi-annual rolling programme, building a good picture of the pattern of pesticides likely to be found and on which products. The specific pesticides and commodities to be checked for in the next year are defined in an annual Commission recommendation.

As part of the coordination, the FVO makes a comparison of the results from both the national and EU coordinated programmes, comparing the overall analysis with the results from previous years from the beginning of the EU coordinated programmes in 1996. In 1999, 40577 samples were taken and analysed.

Commissioner David Byrne emphasises that the report shows there is scope for improvement. "Exceeding the MRLs by any amount is too much - even when it does not necessarily indicate a health risk." EU legislation sets MRLs on the amount of pesticide residues allowed in food for human consumption.

The pesticide levels found in samples that exceeded the permitted MRLs, fall within range that would not cause harm if eaten. Nevertheless, in a small number of pepper samples high levels of methamidophos and endosulfan were found, which gave some reason for concern in the dietary risk assessment carried out by the Commission. Fungicides were the most commonly detected type of residue, matching the results from previous years.

"These excesses must stop," the Commissioner insists. "Foodstuffs must comply with the MRLs that are laid down and producers must respect the statutory limits," he said.

The 1999 coordinated EU monitoring programme targeted four commodities: cauliflower, peppers, wheat grains and melons and analysed them for twenty different pesticides. In this programme, the pesticide that most frequently exceeded the MRL was methamidophos (8.7% of all the samples).

Samples for both national and EU coordinated programmes were taken from retailers, wholesalers, markets, points of entry and processing industries. National sampling programmes also take into consideration: consumption data, production figures, import/export relation and risks in comparison of data with other years.

The full report including detailed data is available on: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/inspections/fnaoil/reports/pesticides/mon_rep/index_en.html

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