



Consumer Voice

Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection DG

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◀ David Byrne,
Commissioner for
Health and Consumer
Protection

Working towards bio-safety and public health

My DG for Health and Consumer Protection has pulled out all the stops to put an enhanced EU capacity in place, able to respond rapidly to any threat to public health from a disease that might be deliberately introduced to the population through bio-terrorism.

Although no attack of this kind has occurred in Europe, I would stress the need to be alert and prepared to deal with the possible introduction of viruses similar to anthrax, through terrorist acts. The challenge now is to ensure our officials and our control and surveillance measures - and those in the Member States - are fully alert to any potential threat to public health, including bio-terrorism.

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Anthrax alert precipitates enhanced public health safety systems

The Commission moved swiftly to step up preparedness and precautionary measures as events unfolded following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. Beginning with a systematic review of existing systems for the protection of public health throughout the EU, plans and options were explored on how their effectiveness could be maximised.

The existing EU Communicable Diseases Network was identified as the most appropriate vehicle for rapid, accelerated development and there are others that will be adapted. Also high on the list of priority actions, is the intensification of existing cooperative interaction with the Member States, with EU trading partners and with organisations competent in the sphere of public health such as the World Health Organisation (WHO).

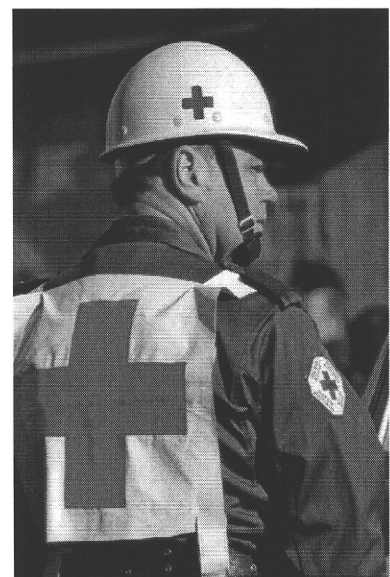
A rapid response to disease outbreak

The EU Communicable Diseases Network (CDN) began work in 1999 to detect and oversee outbreaks of infectious disease - whatever the cause or manner of transmission. It is coordinated by the Commission, interacts with the Member States and connects with the European Public Health Information Network (Euphin-HSSCD). Accelerated development of this network is now underway.

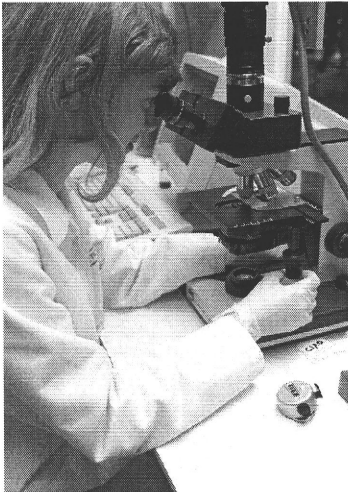
Increasing the strength of the early warning and rapid response capacity is a key priority. Other improvements include increasing the capacity to carry out timely risk assessments of major disease outbreaks including those that could be caused by a bio-terrorist attack. Linking in to the EU network on civil protection will contribute to a coordinated and effective response to any event.

Speedy identification key to control of disease

There are many communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, measles, influenza, HIV/AIDs and meningococcal diseases that represent a serious risk to human health. The CDN is designed to organise the supply and collection of monitor-



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■ **Scientists reviewing current systems**

The Commission has asked the Member States, through the Standing Committee on Foodstuffs and the Standing Veterinary Committees on Public Health and Veterinary Health, to make an urgent review of current defence systems in the areas of animal and food production, to assess their ability to combat a bio-terrorist attack.

ing data, particularly when there are indications of a possible outbreak of an infectious disease. Once a disease outbreak of EU-wide relevance has been confirmed, the network serves to share the information necessary for the control and prevention of transmission of the disease. It can be used by the Member States for consultation and coordination of the measures that they plan to introduce or are introducing.

Cooperation is key to success in combating bio-terrorism

An EU-wide prompt public health response capacity is taking shape. Working in combination with a sustained framework for surveillance and training, a coordinated approach to disease control is seen as key to success. To achieve that aim, the Member States are working closely with the Commission. Acting as coordinator in the endeavour, the Commission will seek to avoid duplication of effort and facilitate pooling their expertise. This will maximise the value of work undertaken by national surveillance centres and laboratories.

There is a need for Member States to be equipped, skilled and capable of answering health threats from infections, whether resulting from natural or deliberate means. Laboratories in the Member States are currently working to identify infections most likely to be imported by natural or bio-terrorist means and to build stocks of medicines ready to combat the threat.

The Member States and the Commission wish to enhance awareness among health professionals, primary care providers and emergency response personnel to ensure utmost readiness. They will form a network of European laboratories to work on diagnosis of rare and emerging infections. Help will be given to arrange exchange of diagnostic samples, methods and information to improve identification of agents and cases. The names of laboratories capable and willing to perform rapid analysis of different agents will be shared.

Cooperation with the US

On the 11 October, Commissioner David Byrne and Dr Fernand Sauer, the Commission's Director in charge of Public Health DG, visited the Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) in Atlanta in the United States. They participated in an intense exchange of information and gained valuable insights into the organisation and workings of this renowned centre. Commissioner Byrne was particularly struck by the working methods based on quick cooperation, mutual information and help when needed.

With experience stretching back over 50 years, the CDC had much solid advice to offer on how the Commission could provide leadership in addressing biological and chemical threats. The CDC indicated willingness to assist with an exchange of expertise between the EU and CDC.

Cooperation with other countries

A meeting of G7 Health Ministers (USA, Canada, Japan, Germany, the UK, France and Italy) plus Mexico and the Commission, discussed a joint response to the threat of bio- terrorism. This meeting investigated the means that can be used to improve rapid responses to health risks and for developing new strategies for increased cooperation with each other. The discussions formed the basis of the plan agreed by the G7 - to coordinate responses to bio-terrorism globally.

Together with the World Health Organisation

The Commission is also building on its existing cooperative arrangement with the World Health Organisation (WHO). With its long history of dealing with communicable diseases, the WHO has a lot of expertise to add to EU efforts to create highly functional and wide-ranging systems for communicable disease control. Close links between EURO-TB (a disease specific network for the surveillance and control of tuberculosis in Europe, coming within the CDN) and WHO are already a reality and point the way forward for future work.

For more details on this subject, please go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph/programmes/bio-terrorism/index_en.html

Consumer Organisations meet in Brussels

In what has become a highly valued event and opportunity for exchange of views, the Consumer Assembly rolled up its collective sleeves and got to work on 18 and 19 of October in Brussels. The 250 participants, including government representatives from the Candidate countries, reported on their achievements and concerns, took part in workshops looking at what the challenges are for the future and put forward a number of issue papers.

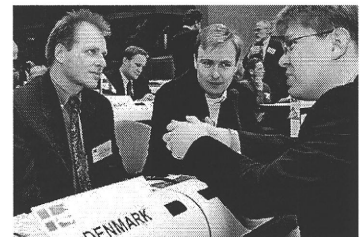
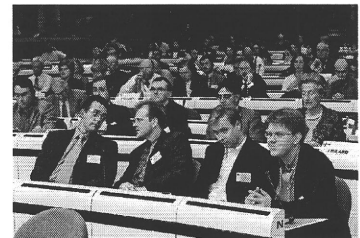
The central theme of the day: "The effect of the Internal Market on Consumer Associations", provided a central focus for debate. Two issue papers were prepared for each workshop, one reflecting the consumer view and the other reflecting the business perspective.

Kicking off proceedings, Commissioner David Byrne, stressed that the internal market should be seen as central to meeting consumer goals. He introduced the Green Paper on consumer protection, describing how it sets out options for more effective regulation for consumer protection, raised standards and enhanced cooperation. Saying he looked forward to entering into dialogue with the consumer organisations on the paper, the Commissioner emphasised the importance of the role they have in policy making and in the enforcement of rules.

And he got an immediate response. Questions came thick and fast only stopping for the next stage of the agenda - a report from a Seminar held on the previous day, 17 October - by Malgorzata Niepokulczycka, President of the Polish Consumer Federation. Reporting for the 13 Candidate countries she spoke of the state of play in implementing the revised General Product Safety Directive and how its proper enforcement can be ensured.

The very lively debate was exactly what the Commission had hoped for with the workshop reports defining very precise areas for development. Director-General of the DG for Health and Consumer Protection, Robert Coleman, in response to many queries about availability of funding for ideas brought forward, said the Commission would look at how this could be addressed in future. However, the Commission can help with some initiatives in a direct form, he told them. Mr Coleman said training programmes could be offered to facilitate improving the effectiveness of consumer organisations in a number of areas. He spoke also of the value of sharing knowledge through new technologies that make it possible to work more effectively together.

For more details on consumer initiatives and events, please go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/index_en.html



▲ 250 participants attended the Assembly of Consumer Associations.



▲ Director General of the DG for Health and Consumer Protection, Robert Coleman.

Swedish Presidency and Agriculture Council commitment to animal welfare

Animals are creatures that have feelings and they should be treated with respect and consideration for their health and welfare, not just in farming but also in the stages that follow.

Animals have an intrinsic value, while man holds a special position with a moral responsibility to treat animals well. By fulfilling this moral responsibility, man can prove himself worthy of his special position.

Animal welfare and aspects of animal ethics should form an important part of the basis for decisions when drawing up the future policy on agriculture and food.

We (the Presidency and Council) will work to strengthen animal welfare within the European Union by:

- basing further legislative work on knowledge of the distinctive character of animals and their special needs. The current debate commits us all, and also when it comes to the practical details;
- implementing and checking existing legislation;
- taking an active part in the debate on animal ethics;
- spreading information and promoting knowledge in the area of animal ethics.

Big improvements in animal welfare on the way

On 23 October, Agriculture Ministers agreed to a Commission proposal banning the custom of tethering sows and of confining them to individual stalls during pregnancy. Each sow is to have more space and the freedom for social interaction and to be able to indulge in natural behaviour such as rooting. The new rules reflect the move towards a better standard of animal welfare in the EU.

Further improvements ensure that pigs will have light for a minimum of 8 hours a day and noise will be kept to comfortable levels in pig holdings. Fresh water must be available at all times and the pigs are to have permanent access to a sufficient quantity of straw or similar material.

Without proper care, much suffering can be caused to animals. The new rules require improved training of stockmen so that they handle the animals appropriately. There are restrictions on certain interventions such as castration, shortening of corner teeth and tail docking. The Commission advises that these techniques should only be used in exceptional circumstances and the keeper of the animals will be obliged to take all possible measures to avoid them. Furthermore, the worst forms of castration will be prohibited.

Farmers are eligible for financial assistance for investments in buildings and technical installations with the objective of improving animal welfare standards under the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund.

The EU pig population in 1998 was 125 million, 12.6 million of which were breeding sows, mainly concentrated in Denmark, Germany, Spain, France and the Netherlands. Production of pig meat has become a highly specialised industry, geared to fattening animals according to pre-established standards with strict delivery deadlines. At present in the EU, almost 65 % of pregnant sows are restrained in individual stalls and more than 60 % are kept without straw.

International conditions of animal protection during transport to be negotiated

The October Agriculture Council authorised the Commission to negotiate revisions to the European Convention for the Protection of Animals During International Transport to seek to ensure that a high level of animal protection is extended outside the borders of the EU. Commissioner David Byrne welcomed the strong mandate to negotiate on behalf of the EU through the ongoing review of the European Convention of the Council of Europe. "It will allow the Community to speak with a single and a strong voice in these important negotiations," he said.

The rules of the updated Convention are due to be agreed in 2002 and, once adopted, will be legally binding.

For more details on animal welfare including relevant scientific opinions, please go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/aw/index_en.html