

PRESS RELEASE

THE SECOND EUROPEAN INFLUENZA CONFERENCE

MALTA, 11-14 September 2005

Organised by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza

GETTING EUROPE PREPARED NOW FOR AN INFLUENZA PANDEMIC

(St. Julian's, Malta): Only by ensuring that one third of European citizens are annually inoculated against the flu and that EU member states start stockpiling anti-virals against the disease will Europe be able to deal successfully with a pandemic outbreak, a group of leading European scientists, healthcare leaders, government representatives and influenza vaccine and anti-virals manufacturers warned in a statement on Sept. 14.

Issued at the end of a four-day conference on influenza organized by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) in Malta, the warning reflects a consensus that a worldwide outbreak of influenza is just a question of time. Only by placing this issue at the top of Europe's health agenda now, will member states take the necessary steps towards preparing infrastructure, citizens and the community at large for the threat.

'Failure to act now to introduce proper pandemic preparedness including early warning systems will leave us empty-handed when a pandemic strikes and will cause needless deaths,' stressed Prof. Dr. Albert D.M.E. Osterhaus, ESWI Chairman.

To help push EU member states forward towards preparedness, ESWI urges the creation of a European Influenza Task Force to accelerate Europe's preparedness by coordinating national plans, tracking disease developments, overseeing vaccine and anti-viral production and stockpiling, promoting best practice in all member states and facilitating communication among all influenza stakeholders. The task force would also play an important role in the international coordination that will be essential to dealing with the outbreak that will affect countries worldwide.

The ESWI recommendation that by the year 2010 one third of the total population of the EU be vaccinated against epidemic influenza annually equates to about 150 million of the 455 million population in the EU-25. Currently, only 17 percent of the overall population is vaccinated and rates vary widely per country.

The most significant cost of influenza to society is the indirect cost of lost productivity and absenteeism. In Europe influenza accounts for around 10 percent of sick leave while the cost of lost productivity in France and Germany alone is estimated at € 8.3 to 12.6 billion per year.

During an influenza pandemic these figures would rise significantly, provoking major disruptions in the supply of essential services and overburdening treatment capacity in all

countries, without proper planning. Therefore, national preparedness plans which include stock-piling of anti-virals are a must.

An influenza pandemic involves the emergence of a novel influenza virus against which the vast majority of the world's population has no immunity. One of the previous pandemics, the Spanish flu in 1918-1919, caused more than forty million deaths representing 1 to 2 percent of the world's population at the time. Pandemics appear to occur with some regularity every thirty to forty years – most recently in 1957 and 1968 – reinforcing concerns that a new pandemic may be imminent.

Recent experience with SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) suggests that a pandemic may spread from its origin with extreme speed. It is estimated that the total cost of SARS in Asia was nearly €50 billion representing about 2 percent of the region's GDP.

Founded in 1992 ESWI is a multidisciplinary group of key opinion leaders in influenza which aims to reduce the impact of epidemic and pandemic influenza in the European population by identifying and communicating with stakeholders and by facilitating interactions between them.