

PRESS RELEASE

by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza

18 June 2009

EU COORDINATION SHOULD ENHANCE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC PREPAREDNESS

Only a EU coordinated purchasing policy of influenza pandemic vaccines will ensure equitable distribution of pandemic vaccines in the European Union and will help WHO to acquire a stockpile of pandemic vaccines for distribution in developing countries. "But since EU coordination to date is insufficient, many countries will not have access to influenza pandemic vaccines once they become available," says Prof Ab Osterhaus, chairman of the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI).

On 11 June, the World Health Organisation (WHO) decided to raise the level of pandemic alert to Phase 6, which means that the "Mexican flu" pandemic is a fact. This decision is a reflection of the spread of the virus, not the severity of illness caused by it. To date, it is impossible to predict the burden of disease and mortality that this 'Mexican flu' pandemic will cause. Several scenarios may be envisaged, but the mere fact that this pandemic virus may gradually change to a much more pathogenic and transmissible virus calls for the urgent implementation of the appropriate pandemic preparedness measures.

The production and distribution of vaccines is a crucial part of the response to pandemic influenza. Since 11 June, vaccine manufacturers have started the production of a 'Mexican flu' pandemic vaccine, the first doses of which are expected to become available from September 2009 onwards. These doses, however, will be reserved for those countries that had ordered them in advance, leaving other countries empty-handed. Since it is not known how many countries have signed a so-called Advanced Purchase Agreement, it remains unclear to what extent EU citizens in different countries will be protected against a possible public health scourge.

Equitable distribution of pandemic vaccines and adequate protection of all citizens in the EU requires a coordinated purchasing and distribution policy. ESWI therefore urges EU authorities to establish a uniform strategy to oversee and coordinate pandemic vaccine production and distribution in the EU. Such a concerted approach is not only necessary to ensure solidarity between EU Member States and their inhabitants, but also between the EU and developing countries worldwide. A unified EU policy is indeed necessary to answer WHO's call for the donation of pandemic vaccine stocks. These stocks will allow WHO to help fighting the influenza pandemic in developing

countries.

In the mean time, seasonal flu viruses continue to circulate. The annual vaccination of at-risk groups against seasonal influenza therefore remains of utmost importance. The pandemic vaccine should not replace the annual flu jab.

More information on ESWI's call for a coordinated EU pandemic vaccine purchasing policy can be obtained from ESWI's chairman, Prof Ab Osterhaus. Prof Osterhaus can be reached on the following mobile number: +31 653 268 606. Prof Osterhaus can also be reached via the ESWI management secretariat at +32 3 232 93 42.

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. More info is to be found on www.eswi.org