

ECDC meeting report: IVth Joint EC/ECDC/WHO Workshop on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness Luxembourg, 25-27 September 2007

Luxembourg became the focus of attention for the 4th Joint EC/ECDC/WHO Workshop on Pandemic Influenza Preparedness, for the second time since 2005. The Workshop was organised and hosted by the European Commission, supported by its organising partners, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) and the European Region of the World Health Organisation (WHO). The event was attended by experts from all 27 EU Member States, together with other countries within the WHO European region; in total, over 50 countries were represented. All delegates were invited to learn and compare information regarding Pandemic Influenza Preparedness.

The overall objective of the workshop was to optimise and improve existing emergency response plans across Europe by sharing best practises and learning about innovations in pandemic preparedness. In the opening session, the representatives of the host organisations outlined the main challenges for the next two years, emphasising the importance of sustaining a high level of preparedness in the Member States to guarantee a clear and complete course of action in the event of a pandemic, but also to keep improving the existing national plans, especially by making these more operational and integrating the plans amongst one another.

According to Zsuzsanna Jakab, Director of the ECDC, there is still much work to be done, despite the progress made in the past few years. Recently established health sector preparedness plans must be integrated across the whole of government. Compatibility amongst the individual plans must also be ensured to guarantee an efficient response in cross-border regions.

The biggest challenge is now to operationalise the national preparedness plans down to a regional level; this is the only way to ensure that planned action to reduce the impact of a pandemic is effectively deployed within



European populations. This should include operational planning by hospitals, doctors and local authorities. It was also outlined that the focus had to remain on maintaining and expanding annual seasonal influenza vaccination coverage for high-risk groups during the interpandemic period. This would need to be carried out in order to maintain public awareness of the risks from influenza, familiarise both health professionals and the public with the practicalities of influenza vaccination and expand global vaccine production capacity to maximise the volume of vaccine available in a pandemic. To implement these measures, it would again be necessary to intensify the collaboration of government departments across Europe.

Workshop participants were given an update on the current global situation and important developments. Caroline Brown, a virologist who leads WHO influenza work in the European Region, reminded listeners that Europe and the rest of the world remains in a state of Pandemic Alert due to the continued presence of 'bird flu' (influenza A/H5N1) in birds, which is now endemic in a number of countries in Asia and Africa. Dr. Abdel-Nasser Abdel-Ghafar from the Ministry of Health and Population, Egypt, then spoke and outlined first-hand information from experience gained during the avian flu outbreaks in poultry, and associated cases of human infection in Egypt, and highlighted the importance and success of early identification and treatment of human cases.

Delegates were also reminded that there is still much to learn about the basic mechanisms of influenza virus transmission, and interventions to prevent or reduce viral spread, including through the use of masks. The workshop stressed the need for more research in these areas to ensure the effectiveness of intervention in case of a pandemic. The importance of continuing to ensure that influenza viruses are shared amongst the global research community was also highlighted. This is essential for the detection of new influenza viruses with pandemic potential, producing new diagnostic tests and the early development of specific pandemic vaccines. Hence virus sharing is central to optimising a rapid response to a cyclically occurring influenza pandemic.

Common consent was given when one speaker emphasised the importance of sharing information and building alliances prior to a pandemic. It can only be

advantageous for two countries to coordinate their responses, as a pandemic will not stop at one country's border.

A particular focus of the workshop was the sharing of good practises, innovations and developments at regional, national and EU level; a large amount of investment in both time and resources had been focussed in the preparation against an influenza pandemic in the last 2-3 years, and the workshop provided an opportunity for the participant countries to demonstrate some of the results of this work through dedicated film and poster sessions that were held outside the meeting rooms and that ran for the duration of the conference.

During the film session, the workshop participants viewed relevant documentaries and video clips produced and contributed by the respective delegations. These focussed on an increase of public awareness about the dangers from influenza. One clip, for example, featured a man sneezing out letters to represent the contagious influenza virus. In the next picture this man tossed a used virus-soaked tissue next to a trash bin. Shortly thereafter a playing child curiously inspects the tissue, picking it up from the ground. As the child walks out of the picture, one can see the virus-representing letters, now on his hands. Other clips focused on raising awareness for common habits and clarifying the mistakes made when it comes to personal hygiene, explaining the proper way to wash hands, dispose of used tissues, and disinfect germ-infested surfaces and how to protect yourself and others when personally affected by an illness. Other visual contributions portrayed the standard of knowledge and showed the preparations that have been taken in the event of a possible pandemic.

In another film, provided and presented by the UK delegation, the filmmakers specifically aimed at increasing public awareness by showing a domino chain reaction resembling the spreading of an influenza virus, only stopping at certain fixed blocks, which stood for particular safety measures that can be taken by each and every individual citizen. The halting of the falling dominos for instance, was shown when people washed their hands, covered their mouths, or stayed home while not feeling well. In addition to the films focussing on the increase of public awareness, there were also contributions that targeted a more specific

audience. The Dutch representatives used their film to train health professionals and civil emergency staff about the dangers and potential impacts of a pandemic.

Some movies were also aimed at those already involved in the preparedness plans; showing guidelines, recommendations and possible ways of optimising certain contingency plans prior to a pandemic outbreak. These included an automated active and proactive surveillance system in Portugal, which is capable of identifying an increased incidence of infections in a certain region, automatically informing local and supra-regional authorities, such as the ECDC.



The poster session in particular gave the Member States an opportunity to present, share and discuss innovations and resources. The posters were presented in eight areas, with each poster area focusing on different aspects related to the workshop.

Section A reviewed pandemic influenza preparedness exercises conducted in Austria, Estonia, Portugal and Spain, with the attention placed on both the planning and execution of pandemic specific exercises at both regional and national level. These highlighted particularly the importance of carefully planning pandemic exercises and the benefits of carefully analysing results to identify strengths and weaknesses and revising plans accordingly.

Section B portrayed the significance of a functional and dedicated communication system. This has proven to be of great importance, as an intact information system is imperative when facing a pandemic. A rapid, adequate and effective response can only occur if communication is coordinated through all levels, starting with alerting authorities when a pandemic threat is identified.

In poster section C, which focussed on infection control measures and hospital preparedness, the Finnish delegation presented their design of a pandemic scenario. The design showed the testing of Finland's own infection control measures and its state of hospital and pandemic preparedness. The outcome and course of the scenario exemplified several major challenges that will have to

be met in the near future. Additional drugs and equipment must be made available; an aspect that was individually presented and discussed in a poster section focussing on pandemic vaccination and antivirals. It was highlighted that bed capacity must also increase and extra labour forces must be called in to meet the increased demand at a time when many of the workforce are likely to be sick or caring for dependants. Intersectoral issues and business continuity plans, surveillance guidelines and avian influenza were the poster section headlines completing this session.

The Swedish delegation exhibited several posters: these included recommendations on how to distribute stockpiled antiviral drugs during a pandemic, including the coordination of distribution of centralised stocks of antivirals to the affected area. Other posters considered business continuity in a pandemic to ensure the maintenance of operations in essential business sectors. The development and improvement of a number of guidelines for pandemic planning across all Swedish County Administrative Boards to ensure a harmonised approach within the Country was also presented. Highlighting the intersectoral issues, the Portuguese and Spanish representatives shared their experiences gathered during meetings of working groups for pandemic influenza preparedness in the northern regions of Portugal and Galicia, Spain.

The core workshop message was summed up at the end of the sessions. This was agreed to be that although great strides have been made and much groundwork completed, joint efforts must continue, in order to ensure that all EU Member States are adequately prepared to deal with a pandemic threat. Only by coordinating efforts at an international level, and increasing public awareness at a local level, can we really be prepared.