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Press release

Handling of the influenza A/H1N1 "pandemic": European citizens want to know more

The handling of the influenza A/H1N1 "pandemic" during the winter of 2009-2010 raises many questions about how recommendations are made and what role do experts have in the context of a health "crisis", whether at the international, European or national level.

There is a lot at stake. In terms of public health, citizens' confidence in their institutions has been dented, and the risk is that *"the next time someone cries wolf on a pandemic, it will not be taken seriously"* (1,2). In several countries, health authorities' difficulties to organise healthcare during a crisis have been shown (3,4).

In economic terms, billion euros were spent on purchasing huge quantities of vaccines and on covering the cost of antiviral drugs, which were used widely despite the lack of reliable evidence to justify this (5 to 8) **(a)**.

The World Health Organization (WHO) is starting to acknowledge the flaws in its global response system for the influenza A/H1N1 pandemic (9). And national committees of inquiry have been set up in several European Member States **(b)**.

At the European level, the Council of Europe is preparing a report on the handling of the A/H1N1 pandemic (10,11), and the European Parliament is taking action (12). **Over 200 Members of European Parliament have signed a call for a parliamentary committee to examine how the influenza A pandemic was handled by the European Union and Community institutions (13).**

The International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB) and the Medicines in Europe Forum welcome this initiative.

The results from these committees shall help citizens have full knowledge on outside influence on medicines policy. Also, these results shall help health authorities to learn important lessons for the management of future health crises: more transparency in the decision-making process is key to restore citizens' trust.

**International Society of Drug Bulletins
(ISDB)**

**Medicines in Europe Forum
(MiEF)**

Notes:

a- According to Dr Wolfgang Wodarg, the former chairman of PACE's sub-committee on health, about 18 billion dollars have been spent worldwide on this pandemic (ref. 2).

b- A French Senate committee of inquiry was appointed on February 17, 2010 and hearings are currently underway (ref. 14). In Bulgaria, the health minister resigned after being accused of signing two improper deals in connection with the purchase of huge quantities of the antiviral drug oseltamivir (Tamiflu®) from the pharmaceutical company Roche (ref. 15).

References:

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- 2- Doshi P "How should we plan for pandemics?" *BMJ* 2009; **339** : 603-605.
- 3- "Extracts of statements made by the leading participants at the public hearing on "The handling of the H1N1 pandemic: more transparency needed?", organised by the Committee on Social, Health and Family Affairs of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) in Strasbourg on Tuesday 26 January 2010". <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/APFeaturesManager/defaultArtSiteView.asp?ID=900>
- 4- "Epidémie de grippe A/H1N1: les questions du Réseau Environnement Santé" press release 9 September 2009. www.reseau-environnement-sante.fr.
- 5- Dr Wolfgang Wodarg "Motion for a Resolution and a Recommendation: Faked Pandemics - a threat for health" www.wodarg.de/english/2948146.html
- 6- Prescrire Editorial Staff "Treatment of influenza: still no tangible impact on complications" *Prescrire Int* 2006 ; **15** (81): 24-25.
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- 10- "Parliamentary Assembly questions handling of H1N1 pandemic" http://www.coe.int/t/dc/files/events/2010_h1n1/default_EN.asp? ; press release ; Strasbourg, 26 January 2010.
- 11- "The handling of the H1N1 pandemic: more transparency needed" Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee; Memorandum by the Rapporteur Paul Flynn, United Kingdom, Socialist: 9 pages.
- 12- "MEPs call for a Parliamentary Committee on the EU management of the influenza A(H1N1) outbreak in 2009" Press release, 9th March 2010, European Parliament, Strasbourg. www.greens-efa.org.
- 13- "Demande de constitution d'une commission parlementaire sur la gestion par l'UE de la grippe A (H1N1) en 2009" Bruxelles, le 16 avril 2010 : 2 pages.
- 14- "Commission d'enquête sur le rôle des firmes pharmaceutiques dans la gestion par le Gouvernement de la grippe A (H1N1)" 17 février 2010. www.senat.fr/commission/enquete/Grippe/index.html
- 15- "Bulgaria's health minister resigns" *SCRIP* n°3491 (9 April 2010): pages 1 and 5.

ISDB. International Society of Drug Bulletins (ISDB), founded in 1986, is a world wide Network of bulletins and journals on drugs and therapeutics that are financially and intellectually independent of pharmaceutical industry. Currently, it has 80 members in 41 countries around the world. More info: www.isdbweb.org. Contact: js@bukopharma.de.

MiEF. Medicines in Europe Forum (MiEF), launched in March 2002, covers 12 European Member States. It includes more than 70 member organizations representing four key players on the health field, i.e. patients groups, family and consumer bodies, social security systems, and health professionals. Such a grouping is unique in the history of the EU, and it certainly reflects the important stakes and expectations regarding European medicines policy. Admittedly, medicines are no simple consumer goods, and the Union represents an opportunity for European citizens when it comes to guarantees of efficacy, safety and pricing. Contact: pierrechirac@aol.com.