



Consumer Voice

Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
From the European Commission's Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General

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David Byrne,
Commissioner for
Health and Consumer
Protection

Editorial

SARS shows us that, even in Europe, the threat posed by infectious disease has not gone away. Old diseases are reappearing in new forms and new dangers are appearing due to the physical and geographical changes in the living environment of micro-organisms. And the events following 11 September have opened up the awful prospect of bioterrorism: that someone would intentionally use biological agents to cause harm.

In the Europe of today, where millions of people each day travel across borders, countries need to work together if they are to respond effectively to these threats. To achieve this, the European Commission will soon be presenting draft legislation to establish a European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. The Centre would aim to enhance disease surveillance, co-ordinate common responses, set up and maintain a network of reference laboratories and liaise with the Member States, acceding countries and international organisations such as the WHO. Although the Centre itself would be relatively small, it would be influential in terms of its "reach"; drawing together the very best the Member States have to offer. In addition to co-ordinating action and technical support, it should provide independent scientific advice to the Commission, other EU Institutions and Member States.

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EU co-operation in fight against SARS

On 6 May 2003, EU health ministers held an Extraordinary Council meeting to co-ordinate and review their efforts in controlling the spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Earlier in the day, SARS was on the agenda of a meeting between David Byrne, EU Health and Consumer Protection Commissioner and Gro Harlem Brundtland, Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The 6 May meetings - and their likely follow up when EU health ministers meet again on 2 June - illustrate the growing importance of co-operation between Member States on health issues.

The EU's Communicable Disease Network - which links Member States' public health institutes - has been monitoring the spread of SARS since 18 March 2003, when the first cases of the disease were confirmed in Europe. Since then, the Network has been providing Europe's health ministries with daily updates on confirmed and suspected cases of SARS in the EU 25 (existing Member States plus the 10 countries due to join in 2004) and 8 other European countries affiliated to the network.



Commissioner David Byrne meets Ms. Gro Harlem Brundtland

Daily updates on SARS cases

on the European Commission's Public Health web site:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_threats/com/sars/sars_stats_en.htm

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■ SARS

The atypical pneumonia called severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) was first recognised in Vietnam on 26 February 2003. SARS is a respiratory illness that usually begins with a fever, sometimes associated with other symptoms (chills, headache, body aches). Scientists believe the disease is spread mainly through close contact with an infected person. People most at risk are therefore healthcare workers and family members of people with SARS.

A previously unrecognised virus belonging to the family of corona viruses has been detected in patients with SARS. After 2-10 days SARS patients may develop a cough. This cough can progress to difficulties in breathing. In 10%-20% of cases, these breathing difficulties are sufficiently serious to require mechanical ventilation. It is estimated that in 4-10 % of cases SARS will prove to be fatal.

At present, no treatment beyond good intensive and supportive care has consistently shown to improve the condition of persons with SARS.

The WHO case definition of SARS can be seen at:
<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/casedefinition/en>

The WHO is to hold a conference on SARS on 17-18 June in Geneva.

⇒ News in brief - Public Health

10 April: European Parliament adopts First Reading Opinion on Commission's proposal for a Directive on standards for the quality and safety of human tissues and cells.

5 May: Commission adopts Proposal for a Council Recommendation on Cancer Screening.

6 May: Extraordinary Health Council on SARS held in Brussels. Ministers also discussed the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control.

The 6 May Council meeting urged Member States, the Commission and the WHO to co-operate in developing a test for SARS and carrying out research on treatments and vaccines. The Commission was mandated to report back to the Health Council in June on measures taken by individual Member States to control SARS and asked to consider developing a general preparedness plan for combating infectious disease outbreaks.

European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control

Commissioner Byrne signalled to health ministers his desire to create a European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. "We need to consolidate the EU's capacity to deal with major health threats. Networking Europe's scientific expertise and improving co-ordination amongst health authorities via a small but effective European Centre will allow us to do this," said Commissioner Byrne.

The Commission will present draft legislation to create the Centre in mid-2003. It is hoped that formal adoption of this legislation by the Council and the European Parliament can be accelerated.

Europeans and e-health information

A Eurobarometer survey published in April by the European Commission shows that, across the EU, nearly one in four Europeans (23%) have used the internet to get health information at least once during the month surveyed. However, the picture varies considerably between countries: in Denmark and the Netherlands around 40% of people use the internet for health information, while in Greece, Spain, Portugal and France usage is at 15% or less. Health professionals, such as doctors and pharmacists, are still by far the most important source of health information for Europeans, and the traditional media - television, newspapers, magazines - still outperform the internet. Other key findings of the survey are that medical and health organisations achieve the highest trust rating on health issues (84%), while businesses and political parties receive the lowest (16% and 11% respectively). For more information see:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_information/indicators/pub_indic_data_en.htm

International veterinary expert meeting in Paris

Veterinary experts from all over the world converged in Paris from 18-23 May 2003 to take part in the General Session of the International Committee of the OIE (Office International des Epizooties), also known as the World Organisation for Animal Health.

This Committee sets international standards that are recognised by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) as the reference for international sanitary rules relevant to trade in animals and animal products. Under Article 3 of the WTO Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS), all WTO members are required to base their health measures on the international standards, where these exist.

In practical terms, the International Committee agrees on amendments and additions to the OIE International Animal Health Codes (one for mammals, birds and bees and another one for aquatic animals) that contain standards, guidelines and recommendations designed to prevent the spreading of diseases and pathogens via



trade. It also agrees the OIE Manuals of Standards for Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines that accompany the Codes, and provides a uniform approach to the diagnosis of OIE-listed diseases and other diseases of importance to international trade.

The OIE has 162 member countries. The EU 15 are members, with the Commission co-ordinating their input. Working together with veterinary representatives from each Member State, the Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General of the Commission brings the collective input together each year to form an EU Common Position. The Council of Ministers votes on and agrees the position in advance of the May meeting.

Animal welfare and food safety – additions to the OIE agenda

Zoonoses (animal diseases that can be transmitted to humans) as well as epizootics (animal diseases that only infect animals), are high on the agenda of the General Session of the OIE. This year, some of the most important topics are bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), transmissible spongiform encephalopathies (TSEs), foot and mouth disease and avian influenza.

In addition, two new topics are taken on-board: animal welfare and food safety. One objective is to try to reduce food-borne risks to human health by preventing and controlling certain hazards that could be eliminated at farm level or that impact on food safety during slaughter. Another is to scrutinise food safety measures to see how hazard control can be improved during animal transport and when harvesting animals.



Photo: Audiovisual Library European Commission

The OIE would like to develop a leading international position on animal welfare by developing science-based standards and guidelines, providing expert advice, and by promoting education and research into the topic.

To find more about Commission international work, go to: http://europa.eu.int/comm/food/fs/ifsi/ifsi_index_en.html

To learn more about the OIE, go to: <http://www.oie.int/>

■ OIE standard setting process

The OIE develops documents laying down norms and standards on which OIE member countries can base their control measures to protect themselves from animal diseases. Standards are prepared by elected specialist commissions and working groups that bring together internationally renowned scientists, most of whom are experts within the network of 152 collaborating centres and reference laboratories that also contribute towards the scientific objectives of the OIE. Many of the experts, and a significant number of well-respected OIE reference laboratories, come from the EU. Veterinary experts from the Health and Consumer Protection Directorate-General are deeply involved in most of these consultations.

The International Committee, made up of all member countries, meets every year in May. It debates the draft standards and puts them forward for adoption at a later session.

■ Animal health crisis at the start of the OIE in 1924

It was an animal health crisis that triggered the creation in 1924 of the OIE. Following a series of outbreaks in Europe of "rinderpest", beginning in 1920, an international conference for the study of epizootics was held that resulted in the establishment of the intergovernmental organisation with 28 founding member countries.

⇒ News in brief: Food Safety

April-May: Avian Influenza – Commission co-operation with national authorities in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany on control measures.

22 April: the Commission adopts transitional derogations and implementing measures to facilitate the swift implementation of the Animal By-Products Regulation as of 1 May 2003.

24 April: Commission adopts proposal for a new Regulation on hygiene requirements for animal feed – the "missing link" to guarantee food safety – and considers establishment of an exclusive "positive list" of permitted animal feed.

1 May: Animal By-Products Regulation enters into force in all Member States aiming to prevent future feed-borne crises like BSE and dioxin contamination.



■ The Euroguichet network

The Euroguichet network of consumer advice centres was launched in the early nineties. In recent years, the network has been reinforced and extended - six new Euroguichets have been created since 1999 - reflecting the growing importance of consumer protection at European level.

Euroguichets, and the related European Extra Judicial Network (EEJ-Net) initiative, are examples of the European Commission taking a practical approach to helping consumers enforce their rights. These networks also allow the Commission to gain a better picture of the real day-to-day problems faced by European citizens.

With the opening of the European Consumer Centre in Athens, the network now consists of 15 partners in 13 Member States.

More information about the Euroguichets network can be found at:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/consumers/redres/s/compl/euroguichet/index_en.htm



The Greek Euroguichet is hosted by INKA, the oldest and biggest network of consumer organisations in Greece. As well as receiving a subsidy from the Commission, the centre also receives financial support from the Central Bank of Greece and the Ministry of Development.

⇒ News in brief: Consumer Affairs

13 April: European Parliament plenary in Strasbourg adopts Whitehead Report on Consumer Policy Strategy 2003-2006 and Patrie and Thyssen reports on the Follow up to the Green Paper on Consumer Protection.

8 May: Informal ministerial meeting on consumer affairs held on Greek island of Eretria.

19 May: Competitiveness Council discusses Consumer Credit Directive and Contract Law Action Plan.

Commissioner David Byrne opens a European Consumer Centre in Athens

In Athens, on 8 May 2003, Commissioner David Byrne and Akis Tsohatzopoulos, the Greek Minister of Development, opened Greece's first "Euroguichet". The European Consumer Centre in Athens will advise Greek consumers on their rights and help them with any problems they encounter in the EU's Internal Market. The new centre will link Greece to the Europe-wide "Euroguichet" network of consumer advice centres.

Commenting on the opening of the centre, Commissioner Byrne said, "It is not enough for Europe just to legislate. Consumers need to know about their rights. If consumers are not confident of their rights they will be reluctant to buy goods or services across borders. The Athens Euroguichet will help Greek consumers enjoy the full benefits of the EU's Internal Market, and, I am sure, will be a valuable partner in the EU network."

EU Ministers discuss unfair commercial practices and consumer rights

At an informal meeting on the Greek island of Eretria on 8 May, EU ministers and European Commissioner David Byrne discussed plans for Europe-wide rules on unfair commercial practices and better co-operation between Member States on enforcement of consumer rights. The future new Member States and the EFTA countries also attended the meeting. The European Commission will soon be presenting proposals for legislation on these issues and Commissioner Byrne briefed the ministers on their likely content. The meeting also discussed ideas for adding impetus to Europe's consumer policy by developing EU-level knowledge and data on consumer issues.

A wide consensus emerged in support of plans for a framework directive on unfair commercial practices. Nearly all the Member States also supported the Commission's plans for a regulation establishing a network of public authorities responsible for the enforcement of consumer protection laws. During the debate Commissioner Byrne told ministers that EU legislation regulating cross border enforcement of consumer laws and unfair commercial practices will improve the functioning of the EU's internal market, and thus benefit both consumers and business.

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