Newsletter on food safety, health and consumer policy
from the European Commission's Health and Consumers DG

Health & Consumer Voice

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Headline News

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In brief

European Parliament's vote on plant protection products

On 13 January the European Parliament adopted in second reading a Regulation to replace the current legislation on plant protection products, based on a Commission proposal from 2006. The new legislation will increase the protection of human health and the environment, will lead to a better protection of agricultural production and will extend and deepen the single market of plant protection products.

This is certainly a very good way for the European Parliament and the Council to start the New Year – by improving the protection of human health and of the environment, said the Commissioner Androulla Vassiliou.

The new Regulation will facilitate innovation by establishing clear criteria for approval of substances. Rules are proposed to ensure an open and competitive market. The existing legislation is improved and simplified, in particular in terms of approval procedures.

The new rules confirm the importance that the European Commission gives to a high level of protection of human health and the environment, while at the same time harmonise further the availability of plant protection products. Moreover, they intend to favour competition and reduce administrative burden for all stakeholders.

The text contains provisions on the following main issues: criteria for approval of active substances; inspection and monitoring on production, storage, transport and use of plant protection products; a simplified evaluation and authorization procedure; the role of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA); data protection – data sharing; mutual recognition for plant protection products; informing on the use of plant protection products to neighbours; reduction of tests on vertebrates.

The Commission welcomes the work done by the European Parliament and the Council as all objectives targeted by the initial proposal have been maintained in the text resulting from the co-decision process.

The new legislation has to be formally adopted by the Council, and it will enter into force later this year. Together with the end of the review programme of existing active substances, the Commission will have met its objective to make sure that efficient plant protection is achieved with safer products.

For further information, please view:

http://europa.eu/rapid/pressReleasesAction.do?reference=MEMO/09/8&format=HTML&aged=0&language=EN&guiLanguage=fr

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In brief

Preventing infant accidents: EU standard for baby walkers adopted

A European safety standard for baby walkers, which will help to prevent many childhood accidents, has been published in the Official Journal on 13 January, following its formal adoption by the European Commission.

Given the rising incidence of accidents caused by this equipment, Member States requested that a safety standard be set at EU level and backed the Commission's proposal to introduce this standard at the General Product Safety Committee (GPSD) in November 2008 and the European Parliament has also welcomed the decision.

The EU standard introduces a requirement for stability tests during the manufacture of baby walkers, and for the design to be geared towards reducing the risk of injuries.

The standard will provide all economic operators and market surveillance authorities will have a clear, quick and single reference for making, importing or checking baby walkers for safety. Such standard was developed by the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN), and is already being used by market surveillance authorities in Member States when checking the market for unsafe childcare products.

Standards are voluntary, but a product manufactured according to a standard published in the EU Official Journal is presumed to be safe. If manufactures chose to deviate from the EU standard, they have to ensure that their product provides the same safety levels and requirements indicated in the standard.

For further information, please see:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/safety/news/index_en.htm

http://www.cen.eu/

Cancer screening in Europe needs to be doubled

In the first Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation of 2 December 2003 on cancer screening, published on 22 January, the Commission highlights that although much progress has been made within the area of cancer screening, more is still required. By providing a clear description of the situation and the gaps, this report helps to renew the commitment to put in place breast, cervical and colorectal cancer screening as a crucial and cost-effective measure to reduce the burden of cancer in the European Union.

Cancer is the second most common cause of death in the European Union. Breast, cervical and colorectal cancer accounts for 32% of cancer deaths in women and 11% in men. With an ageing population, the figures are due to increase unless preventive measures are taken to reduce cancer deaths.

The EU shares a common commitment to ensuring proper screening for breast, cervical and colorectal cancer, as set out in Council Recommendation of 2 December 2003 on cancer screening (2003/878/EC).

In the first implementation report, published on 22 January, the Commission highlights that although much progress has been made in the field of cancer screening, Member States have not fully put this screening in place. The current annual volume of screening examinations in the EU is considerable; however, this volume is less than one-half of the minimum annual number of examinations that would be expected if the screening tests specified in the Council Recommendation on cancer screening were available to all EU citizens of appropriate age (approximately 125 million examinations per year).

Less than half of these examinations (41%) are performed in population-based programmes which provide the organisational framework for implementing comprehensive quality assurance as required by the Council Recommendation.

Also, less than half of the minimum recommended numbers of screenings take place in the EU each year.

Member States should continue to improve or implement population-based cancer screening programmes, supported by collaboration between Member States and professional, organisational and scientific bodies and experts.

The Commission intends to form a European partnership for action against cancer in 2009 by bringing together relevant stakeholders across the EU in a collective effort to addressing cancer. The partnership will support Member States in their efforts to tackle cancer more effectively. Key areas for future cancer activities include: heath information, collection and analysis of comparable data; primary prevention; identification and promotion of good practice in cancer-related healthcare; priorities for cancer research.

The Report on the Implementation of the Council Recommendation of 2 December 2003 on cancer screening is available at the following URL:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/genetics/keydo_genetics_en.htm

General Product Safety Directive: positive record 2004-2008

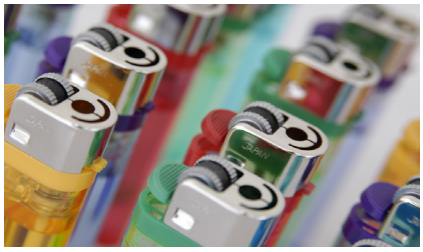
On 14 January the European Commission adopted a Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, reporting on the first years (2004-2008) of implementation of the General Product Safety Directive. This is the basic legislation governing the safety of non-food consumer products in the EU. The Directive in essence sets out the Member States' powers and duty to control the market and take appropriate measures should unsafe products be found, and also sets out the corresponding duties of the economic operators.

The General Product Safety Directive has proven to be a powerful tool for ensuring a high level of consumer protection and I am pleased to confirm once again that we are on the right track in making use of this Directive, which is one of the most important instruments in the consumer safety armoury, Commissioner Meglena Kuneva said.

The Directive has laid down clear responsibilities to track down and eliminate unsafe products from the European market. The RAPEX system, the European rapid alert system for dangerous non-food consumer products, set up under the Directive, has gained rapidly in efficiency and is a model or benchmark for many third countries or regions.

The major increase in RAPEX notifications over the last four years is a clear indication that market surveillance under the Directive has been successful.

Furthermore, economic operators are increasingly adopting measures on their own initiative to contain the risks posed by consumer products. This shows that responsible businesses take product safety seriously and respect the obligations placed on them by the Directive.



The report suggests a number of ways in which to develop the framework and actions, including:

• the benefits which would be gained by further co-coordinated market surveillance between the Member States, given the increasingly global market and more and more products coming to the EU from third countries;

• the need to be able to better trace a dangerous product back to its manufacturer or importer in order to take fully effective measures;

• the scope to increase efficiency if the Commission, assisted by the Member States, were more quickly and easily able to ensure that there are state-of-the-art standards for individual products and, furthermore, when a risk is generally recognised, to ban the marketing of such a product or substance permanently under this instrument rather than further product-specific directives.

The implementation report is not however an act whereby the Commission puts forward any concrete proposals and further conclusions in this respect will follow later.

For more information, please see:

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/safety/prod_legis/index_en.htm

In brief

First Eurobarometer on mental health and children

Improving the mental health and well-being of children and young people is one of the five priorities set out in the European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being which was launched at the EU high level conference in June 2008.

A new Flash Eurobarometer survey published on 13 January on the Mental Health and Well-being of Children and Young people examined parents' perceptions of their child's mental health and well-being in 27 European Countries. Approximately 12,750 randomly selected parents (including step-parents/guardians) were interviewed. Several aspects of the quality of life were assessed: i.e. child's level of energy and fitness, depressive moods and emotions, stressful feelings, physical well-being, child's autonomy, as well as child's opportunities to structure and enjoy his/her social life and leisure time and participation in social activities.

The survey uses a standardised cross-cultural assessment tool, the KIDSCREEN-index. The results of the survey show wide variations both between and within countries. This survey tool complements existing health data on the mental and psychological well-being of children and young people in the monitoring of population health.

For a short summary of the results:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_determinants/life_style/mental/mental_health_en.htm

To read the complete results of the Flash Eurobarometer:

http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/index_en.htm

Commission takes steps to promote patient safety in Europe

The Commission has recently adopted a Communication and proposal for a Council Recommendation with specific actions that Member States can take, either individually, collectively or with the Commission, to improve the safety of patients. Each year, in the EU, between 8% and 12% of patients admitted to hospitals suffer harm from the healthcare they receive, including from healthcare associated infections. Much of that harm is preventable.

The most common types of adverse events in healthcare are: healthcare associated infections; incorrect or delayed diagnoses; surgical errors; and medication related errors. Most efforts to improve patient safety at Member State and EU levels have so far focussed on specific causes, for example, minimising the risk from medicinal products, medical devices or antimicrobial resistance.

The Commission Communication recommends a comprehensive approach to improving patient safety. Member States are encouraged to put in place and improve strategies to prevent and control adverse events in all healthcare settings. The primary focus is on addressing systemic and organisational failures responsible for most harm to patients. Key recommendations for Member States include, for example: establishing or strengthening reporting and learning systems; embedding patient safety in the education and training of healthcare workers; involving patients in the development of safety measures; and providing patients with relevant information on health risks and safety issues. Member States are also encouraged to share best practice and expertise in this field.

For further information, please see:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_systems/patient_safety_en.htm

A pact for toy safety in the EU

In the end of 2008, European Consumer Affairs Commissioner Meglena Kuneva signed an agreement with representatives of toy retailers and importers in a toy store near Brussels, as part of the Commission's drive to improve toy safety by engaging all actors throughout the toy industry. Formerly, the Commission signed a similar agreement with Toy Industries of Europe.

A product safety stocktaking exercise carried out by the Commission at the end of 2007 (after a series of high-profile recalls), showed that while reputable businesses make significant efforts to ensure that their products are safe, dangerous goods, including toys, are still finding their way onto the EU market. This is mainly due to gaps at the lower end of the market, where safety procedures are not as rigorously respected or adhered to as they should be. For this reason, it is crucial to have the commitment of EU retailers and importers in pushing forward the toy safety agenda and carrying out the necessary safety actions at ground level.

The industry signatories agreed to a number of activities to further improve toy safety, including providing education and training on safety standards, with a particular focus on the "lower end of the market" where the vast majority of non-compliant toys are found. Clear safety guidelines will be developed to ensure that products meet the required standards.

For further information, please see::

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/citizen/my_safety/index_en.htm

In brief

Public consultation on Europe's workforce for health

In the end of 2008 the European Commission adopted a green paper on the EU workforce for health. This marked the beginning of a consultation period which aims to identify common responses to the many challenges facing the health workforce in Europe.

In ageing Europe, with growing healthcare costs and rising expectations from both citizens and patients, a high quality health workforce is crucial for successful health systems. The health workforce plays an important role in the EU economy accounting for about 10% of all jobs. In addition, 70% of EU healthcare budgets are allocated to salaries and employment related issues.

The ageing population is changing the pattern of disease and placing new and increasing demands on healthcare workers. It also means that the health workforce is itself an ageing one and there are insufficient new recruits to replace those that are retiring or leaving the EU. Migration of health professionals into and out of the EU and mobility within the EU also has impacts on the supply and distribution of health workers.

The aim of the green paper is to launch a debate on how best to tackle such challenges and to engage stakeholders in discussion.

The green paper is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_systems/workforce_en.htm

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