

Public health: network for epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases in the European Community EWRS

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The Committee took on Council and Commission by insisting on the establishment of a European Centre for the Surveillance of Communicable Diseases - on the grounds that the microbial agents responsible for infectious diseases know no borders. Such a centre had been ruled out in the Council's common position on a proposal for a European Parliament and Council Decision on the creation of a network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases in the European Community. The Commission also warned the committee that it was opposed to a centre "at this stage". The diseases in question include sexually-transmitted diseases, viral hepatitis, food-borne diseases, water-borne diseases and diseases of environmental origin, nosocomial infections, Creutzfeldt-Jakob's disease, yellow fever, cholera and plague, rabies, typhus fever, viral haemorrhagic fevers and malaria. Considering the proposal for a second time under the codecision procedure, the committee retabled from first reading a number of significant amendments to the common position in line with the advice of its rapporteur, Mr Christian CABROL (UFE, F), who expressed his great disappointment at the weakness of the Council position, which gave little assurance that the groundwork for an effective system of cooperation and coordination was being laid. Despite Commission opposition at present to a European Centre, its representative agreed with members that the common position represented a "watering down" of the original proposal. Members accepted Mr Cabrol's view that the establishment of a European Centre was the sine qua non of any effective action at European level. "We cannot delude ourselves into thinking that the information collected at the level of different Member States will just magically coordinate itself into a useful and useable form," said Mr Cabrol. The centre would have a two-way function, receiving data from Member States and recycling it among them. The retabled amendments include the incorporation of an early warning system into the Community level structure, the need to use consistent definitions and compatible technologies, the establishment of pre-arranged methods for data collection and the coordination of measures for the control of communicable diseases. Members also rejected the Council's preference for "gradual" coverage of these diseases: they want action now. The committee also rejected the Council's view that action should be taken according to the "resources available", as this could well be used as an excuse to take no action whatever. Members agreed that the costs of the operation at Community level should be met by the Community but deleted the Council's suggestion that funds be found from existing programmes, which Mr Cabrol described as "severely underfunded as it is". The recommendation by Mr Cabrol, incorporating 22 amendments to the common position, was adopted unanimously by the committee.