

Animal diseases and public health: measures for the control of avian influenza (repeal. Directive 92/40/EEC)

2005/0062(CNS) - 08/12/2005

The Council held a debate focusing on the need for clear and evidence-based information to the public and for steps to be taken both at national and at EU level to prepare for a possible outbreak of human pandemic influenza.

The debate covered the following issues:

- sharing of information and coordination (e.g. between Member States, the Commission, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and with the World Health Organisation) about the communication to the public about pandemic influenza;
- specific contribution that Member States envisage that EU action, especially the research and development programmes, could make to prepare for a pandemic;
- other specific actions at EU level that Member States believe would add value to work already in hand (for example through the World Health Organisation) to improve both production capacity and speed of access to antivirals and vaccines.

In its conclusions, the Council insisted on the need to distinguish between avian influenza, where the World Health Organisation (WHO) has stressed that the risk is very low for the general human population; seasonal influenza which occurs every year but for which annual vaccination is available; and the risk of human pandemic influenza.

The Council states that scientific advice remains that the risk of avian influenza being directly transmitted to humans from birds is still very low at the present time. A vital first step in protecting human health from risk of pandemic is for Member States to complete their national plans in accordance with WHO guidelines. National plans also provide the foundation for international cooperation at a global and EU level. It also recognises the important role of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in providing scientific advice to the European Commission and to Member States. It highlights the importance of strengthening coordination between Member States and the European Commission on a range of issues using, where possible, existing coordination Mechanisms. There is a need for clear and objective communications with the public to reduce the likelihood of confusing messages to the citizens of Europe. The Council agrees that the need to build up production capacity for antivirals that will be required to maximise protection of populations is an urgent priority. It notes that this is primarily a matter for Member States but that there could be further action at EU level to help to address this and that there should be further consideration of the available options for dealing with an outbreak including the feasibility and added value of the EU holding a targeted strategic stockpile of antivirals.

The Council also notes the importance of building up production capacity for vaccines and notes the importance of increasing the research effort into the development of new vaccines, in support of which the European R&D Framework programmes can play a valuable role.

The Council calls upon the Commission to :

- 1) come forward with its proposals for rapid implementation of the Community aspects of the International Health Regulations as soon as possible;
- 2) strengthen the existing coordination mechanisms between Member States and the European Commission in close collaboration with the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control in ways that allow Member States to share information about proposed responses and to consider how to avoid giving confusing messages to the general public; and
- 3) consider proposals on further practical action that would add value at EU level to action at national level and in international organisations, especially the WHO.

The Member States are called upon to :

- 1) ensure that national planning is stepped up and completed;
- 2) to share with each other, and with the European Commission, information about the messages being given to the public about pandemic influenza and about action to protect human health from the risks of pandemic influenza; and
- 3) take action to implement the International Health Regulations as quickly as possible.