



PRESS RELEASE

THE FOURTH ESWI INFLUENZA CONFERENCE

Organised by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI)

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED WHEN HUNTING FOR A MOVING KILLER

(St. Julian's, Malta): Only by ensuring that national and international health authorities, academia and pharmaceutical industry forge strong and effective collaborations to improve pandemic preparedness will Europe be able to deal successfully with a new outbreak of pandemic influenza. Issued at the end of a four-day conference on influenza organized by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) in Malta, the warning reflects a consensus that a new worldwide outbreak of influenza is just a question of time. Predicting a pandemic virus is impossible, and although scientists expect the avian influenza virus H5N1 to be a likely source of a new killer virus, other candidate strains do exist.

The deadly H5N1 virus recently showed up in poultry and wild birds in countries that had been virus-free for several years, such as Bulgaria, Romania and Israel. In addition, recent research shows that H5N1 only needs the very limited number of five mutations to become as efficiently transmitted as the seasonal influenza virus. And thirdly, a mutant strain,

called H5N1-2.3.2.1, that is able to sidestep the effects of the existing vaccines, is spreading in Asia and beyond. Together, these events signal the risk of a resurgence of H5N1 influenza, posing a serious threat to human health.

Yet, the past pandemic has shown that attention should not only be focused on H5N1 infections, but also on other subtypes of influenza A virus. H1N1 influenza continues to reassort in pigs, H3N2 influenza crosses the species barrier regularly... “Influenza is a moving target, and one should expect the unexpected,” said Dr Ab Osterhaus, the ESWI chair.

Conference calls for action

At the Fourth ESWI Influenza Conference, the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic has been thoroughly evaluated in all of its aspects. Consensus exists that European countries have managed the pandemic crisis well. Excellent surveillance, mass vaccination campaigns and the use of antiviral drugs have contributed to a reduced impact of the pandemic for the first time in human history.

Improvements, however, are to be made in light of the emergence of the next influenza pandemic. Heightened readiness is needed on a global scale:

- Global monitoring of human and animal influenza must be improved to evaluate the spread of existing influenza viruses and to detect the appearance of new virus strains.
- Such improved monitoring relies on effective surveillance that covers the current white spots on the world map.
- Current pre-pandemic vaccines must be tested for effectiveness against the emerging mutant influenza virus strains.
- Investments in studies on the evolution of influenza viruses in humans and animals must be increased to better understand the evolution of influenza viruses.

Therefore, the Fourth ESWI Influenza Conference urges national and international authorities, academia and pharmaceutical industry to forge strong and effective collaborations to improve pandemic preparedness

worldwide.

WHO's flu vaccination recommendations

Routine vaccination of risk groups against yearly recurrent seasonal influenza is a pillar of pandemic preparedness. In this light, the World Health Organization launched its seasonal flu vaccination recommendations also endorsed by the European Commission, urging Member States to annually immunize at least 75% of its senior citizens and other risk groups against influenza. In 2011, virtually none of the EU member states comes close to achieving the recommended rates, despite European health care systems being amongst the best in the world.

Discussions at the conference had been opened by John Dalli, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, who emphasized the importance of collaboration between science and policy. "We all share the same goal: to reduce the burden of influenza. To get there, we need to work together. Science has an important role to play. It is only by combining the latest scientific knowledge with effective policy planning, that we will succeed in addressing the disease," Mr Dalli said.

This statement is at the hearth of the Fourth ESWI Influenza Conference. Indeed, the conference gathered organizations of healthcare providers, senior citizens, at-risk patients and public health authorities in a separate programme track called the Science Policy Interface. Remarkable examples of collaboration between various stakeholder groups and their positive impact on public health were presented and discussed, demonstrating the key importance of interacting with stakeholders and managing the dialogue.

Permanent attention for the lifeblood of the influenza field

The Fourth ESWI Influenza Conference has been a top-level scientific meeting, owing to the quality of the novel and mind boggling data presented during the various sessions. Many of these data have been produced by young, promising scientists. Indeed, some of the best and most innovative ideas come from young researchers, who are, after all, the future of the scientific influenza field. For this reason, ESWI has been actively encouraging the careers of promising scientists for many years. An excellent example of a promising influenza researcher, Gülsah Gabriel received the first ESWI Best

Body of Work Award in 2009 and she has been an active member of ESWI ever since. At the Fourth ESWI Influenza Conference, Dr Gabriel passed her title of Best Body of Work Award Winner over to Vincent Munster, highlighting his pioneering work in influenza ecology. "I'm giving you this Prize, not as an Olympic flame, but rather as a scientific flame," Dr Gabriel said, emphasizing the importance for young scientists to step out of their laboratories and to engage in a dialogue with the community of influenza stakeholders.

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The European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) is a partnership organization of stakeholders with a clear mission: to reduce the number of influenza victims in Europe.