



PRESS RELEASE

PREPARING EUROPE FOR THE NEXT PANDEMIC

THE THIRD EUROPEAN INFLUENZA CONFERENCE

VILAMOURA, PORTUGAL, 14-17 September 2008

Organized by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza

(Vilamoura, Portugal): Proper surveillance, stockpiling of effective antivirals and efficient vaccination strategies are the keys to preparing for the next influenza pandemic, a group of leading European scientists, healthcare leaders, government representatives and influenza vaccine and antivirals manufacturers warned in a statement on Sept. 17.

Issued at the end of a four-day conference on influenza organized by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) in Portugal, the warning reflects a consensus that a 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 the most likely source of a new killer virus, other candidate strains do exist.

Antivirals have always been seen as an important treatment option in the fight against a potential pandemic H5N1 threat. This has led to the stockpiling of neuraminidase inhibitors such as oseltamivir. Experts at the conference therefore debated the natural resistance to oseltamivir that recently emerged in H1N1 viruses. They agree that there are substantial differences between H1N1 and H5N1, and that there is no evidence yet that a similar resistance will happen in H5N1. "Don't throw away your oseltamivir boxes, they may still be useful", said Maria Zambon of the UK's Health Protection Agency.

Next to new generations of antivirals and vaccines, academic and pharmaceutical researchers jointly develop new ways to help governments prepare medical interventions for a future pandemic. The stockpiling and use of

pre-pandemic and pandemic vaccines have been a subject of intense debate between scientists and policy makers. Referring to new adjuvants and vectored vaccines, Professor Ab Osterhaus, ESWI chairman, said "if you compare what we have today versus three years ago, the field has advanced immensely."

Healthcare workers play a key role in the vaccination of at-risk groups (the elderly and the chronically ill). "Patients heavily rely on their recommendations. However, for various reasons, healthcare workers do not fully recognize the importance of their role in combating influenza. Yet, their advice is crucial and saves lives", argued Osterhaus. Medical ethicists and leading healthcare workers took it even further: "Inoculate yourself first to better serve your patients and reduce their risk of exposure", they said.

Founded in 1993 ESWI is a multidisciplinary group of key opinion leaders in influenza which aims to reduce the impact of epidemic and pandemic influenza in the European population by identifying and communicating with stakeholders and by facilitating interactions between them.

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