

THE EUROPEAN INFLUENZA TASK FORCE (EIT)

Given the complex nature of how to combat epidemic and pandemic influenza, recent discussions have stressed the need for a well-structured collaboration among human and animal health experts, specialists in the fields of virology, epidemiology, pathology, ecology and agriculture, as well as communication experts and experts in translating science into policy at a global level. It has been proposed to create a global task force for influenza, consisting of leading specialists in these fields, that would be able to respond rapidly and effectively, so that data can be exchanged and integrated as they emerge¹. When the need occurs, outbreak management teams can be formed and targeted at a specific outbreak in a defined area of the world. These teams should consist of taskforce representatives as well as local experts and policy makers from the affected areas or countries. During the SARS outbreak, the viability of this approach was shown by the WHO teams formed to deal with this emerging threat².

ESWI now proposes that, as part of this global strategy, a European taskforce for influenza (EIT) is formed, in which all the above mentioned fields of expertise and disciplines are brought together at a European level. Representatives of the European influenza vaccine and antiviral industries should be included to facilitate the establishment of intervention strategies in influenza outbreak situations in humans and animals in Europe. EIT representatives could also stem from European and global governments, institutions and NGO's. Also UN organizations should be considered because they are in the unique position to provide the political goodwill and to endorse the proposed integrated approach to the problem of animal and human influenza in Europe. The scientific specialists of the respective disciplines are needed and should be recruited from EU member states on the basis of their expertise and scientific excellence.

The duties of the Taskforce would be:

1. To gain insight in the European picture of influenza, taking into account temporal and geographical variation of influenza viruses in Europe and in those areas that may pose a direct threat to Europe. Besides human influenza viruses, those of several animal species like wild birds, poultry, pigs, horses and cats should be taken into account.
2. To prioritise research and integrate knowledge of different disciplines on human and animal influenza.

3. To advance early warning systems and intervention strategies for influenza outbreaks in humans and animals. Participation of industrial partners in this area is crucial.
4. To translate knowledge into policy advice, emphasizing the integration of human and animal health strategies.

Concrete strategic objectives for EIT in the next five years will be:

1. The increase of annual influenza vaccination to one third of the human population in all EU member states;
2. The creation of public private partnerships between European authorities and vaccine manufacturers for research and development of pandemic influenza vaccine candidates and antivirals;
3. The establishment of adequate stockpiles of antiviral compounds for pandemic influenza preparedness in all the EU member states.

The role of ESWI in the establishment of EIT will be to facilitate the formation of this taskforce, by helping to identify the respective participants and representatives, by stimulating communication among them and by helping to create the political will and the required funding possibilities for this initiative.

References

1 R. Fouchier, T. Kuiken, G. Rimmelzwaan, A. Osterhaus: Global Task Force for Influenza, *Nature*, 435, 419-420 (2005)

2 WHO, *Lancet* 361, 1730-1733 (2003)