

## PRESS STATEMENT

### Recommended: influenza vaccination for travellers

#### Flu prevention deserves more attention in travel medicine

*(embargoed until 29 September 2016, 1 PM CET)*

*Brussels, 28 September 2016* - In our globalizing world, travellers are a fast-growing risk group for influenza. In fact, seasonal influenza is the most frequent vaccine preventable infectious disease in travellers. Yet, surprisingly, recommendations regarding influenza in travel medicine are scarce. Therefore it is necessary to harmonize international and national travel medicine guidelines for influenza prevention and treatment. This important topic will be at the core of a lecture during the upcoming Science Policy Flu Summit, to be held at the International Press Centre in Brussels on 28 September 2016 (<http://www.eswi.org/flusummit/>). This lecture will be held by Dr. Marco Goeijenbier, resident internal medicine at the Rotterdam Havenziekenhuis en Instituut voor Tropische Ziekte (Harbour Hospital and Tropical Diseases Institute).

Travellers routinely check whether they have been fully vaccinated against measles, mumps, rubella, diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis before starting their travel. And obviously, other vaccines (like yellow fever and rabies vaccines) are recommended for those who travel to areas with these infections risks. Yet, the flu shot rarely appears on the list of recommended vaccinations for travellers, although seasonal influenza is the most frequent vaccine preventable infectious disease in travellers. Moreover, large gatherings like the Hajj, the Umrah, and international sporting events and festivals

may stimulate the global spread of influenza. Modern modes of transport, like cruise ship and air travel, also require special attention from this public health perspective. Indeed, modern cruise ships usually carry over 5000 passengers served by more than 2000 crew members, who can be influenza virus reservoirs between trips. Routine vaccination of crew members against flu would therefore be a logical thing to do.

And although travellers going to the opposite hemisphere are advised to be vaccinated with a flu vaccine containing strains circulating at their place of destination, this advice is often hard to implement. Even in years when the northern and southern hemisphere vaccines contain identical strains, the shelf life of the local 'winter influenza vaccine' may well have expired when travel is considered and neither the following winter season vaccine nor the opposite hemisphere vaccine are available. Action is therefore needed to increase the shelf-life of seasonal flu vaccines and/or to ensure global licensure of these influenza vaccines.

Avian influenza (or the bird flu) may pose another threat to travellers, especially those travelling to South-East Asia and China where bird flu viruses like H5N1 and H7N9 continue to circulate. Although bird flu only sporadically occurs in humans, preventive measures do play a role in dealing with traveller's risk. After all, no bird flu vaccines for humans are available, so guidelines should concentrate on raising awareness of travel medicine professionals, in order to have travellers adjust their behaviour through pre-travel advice.

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