

**Preparedness planning in the Community:
Influenza and other health threats
27 November 2001, Brussels**

Protocol of the Speech of Mr Coleman

Next steps for the Commission- Future perspectives

Thank you very much, Ron, ladies and gentlemen,

Two years ago, I became Director General for 'Health and Consumer Protection' and as is my habit I started to read around the subject a bit. And it was by chance that I fell on a history of the Spanish flu epidemic. And that got my attention, as they say. So I started to read around a bit more and I came across a very interesting book, I think its title was 'Guns, Germs and Steel'. Some of you know that book, if not, you should. It got my attention even more. So then I started to look on the web and find out more. And that was the origin of my conversation with Ron, because I had the feeling that as a newly arrived Director General for Health in the European Community, I might have a problem. Are we really prepared?

So, I am very glad to have this opportunity to come to the end of this conference today because this is the first major event of a new type which has grown out of that process of reflection on our state of preparedness. And I would like to first of all express my appreciation for the work you have put into the conference, obviously to Prof. Osterhaus and to Ron Haigh, in particular, but to all of you. Some of the recommendations that you are making are clearly addressed to the Commission and to my Directorate General, in particular. And in the speech you heard this morning from Commissioner Byrne he already addressed some of the future actions that we are thinking about. I am not going to repeat it. The essential message that we wish to communicate to you is that we have realised the need for improved pandemic planning at Community level. And the obvious answer seems to us to be the development of a Community preparedness plan. We have already some elements to constitute some of the components of that plan.

The ongoing surveillance carried out by the European Influenza Surveillance Scheme in our view needs to be strengthened and put on a sustainable basis. And SANCO will encourage the EISS to seek participation of all Member States, EFTA and EEA countries, and of course also the candidate countries, and to strengthen the co-operation with other rapid alert network systems in the Community and outside. Incidentally, in another context, the question of integrating some of the alert networks that we have is already clearly on the agenda. Because we now have quite a number and they work together more or less. We could clearly achieve greater efficiency and efficacy simply by integrating what we have. So, our goal is to try to establish the EISS as the main pillar of influenza surveillance within the Community network on communicable diseases.

Second, timely and appropriate risk assessment is a crucial element of pandemic response. And SANCO is working on a concept for a mechanism to set-up epidemiological intervention teams. Those teams should assist Member States in carrying out investigations of health threats on the spot. The adoption of a mechanism

for co-ordination of joint intervention from several Member States to assist a country or several countries struck by a pandemic would certainly constitute a significant element of 'Community added value'. And there, if I could make a political comment, it is much easier to proceed at Community level if we are doing something which supplements what Member States do, at least initially. If we immediately begin talking about something which substitutes for what they do, it normally gets quite an allergic reaction, as you can imagine.

Third, reliable surveillance depends on good laboratory services. For pandemic planning an inventory on laboratory capacity and facilities is absolutely essential. The database established by the current Inventory of Resources of Infectious Diseases in Europe (IRIDE) can be used as a starting point. The next step of pandemic planning will be to agree with Member States on a policy on co-ordinating capacity. And SANCO will raise the issue of establishing a co-ordinated network of public health laboratories within the Member States in this context. A further point we have to clarify soon is the need to establish a Community Reference Laboratory for influenza. And the same is true for other communicable diseases with a pandemic potential.

Fourth, of vital importance for pandemic planning is the development of a Community policy to ensure availability and access to vaccines and anti-viral drugs. And my services will seek to liaise with the Member States, industry and other relevant parties to identify bottlenecks and the suitable models for stockpiling. I could add there that since we are responsible for animal health, it struck me very quickly how odd it was that I was paying through the Community budget for vaccines for animals but not for people. And there is also a long-standing emergency system for animals but not for people. Acceleration of procedures for new vaccines is another issue to be discussed with the WHO and EMEA. And of course, we'll continue to support the research department which is funding projects addressing the development and production of new influenza vaccines, particularly projects on new techniques in vaccine production about which we have been hearing some interesting things recently.

I am also confident that the concepts which we have been developing together with the Member States to improve preparedness for terrorist attacks, on which we have been working very intensively since September as you can imagine, will prove useful in the context of responses to pandemic public health threats in general. It is quite clear that there is a considerable overlap between the two subjects. And as I say your work fits very well into our plans to address problems of bio-terrorism, which really force us to find solutions.

Your suggestions, including some of the ones I haven't mentioned because it hasn't been possible to reflect about them yet, make us none the less aware that we'll only find successful overall solutions through co-ordinated efforts between the Community on the one hand and the Member States on the other. This is a partnership exercise. Even if under current legislation and the Treaty itself response to a pandemic remains the primary responsibility of the Member States, it seems to us that better co-ordination at Community level is indispensable. In fact, pandemic planning requires a precise and reliable mechanism of interaction between all the parties involved: Commission, Member States, international organisations including their regional components and the industry. And it requires a high level of willingness and

capability to overcome very substantial difficulties, and they may be at political, technical, administrative and indeed at socio-economic levels. However, we are convinced that there is no way round it; that these problems have to be addressed.

You have identified a number of very serious points. And we have also learned about the gaps which need to be filled to make pandemic planning a powerful mechanism for appropriate action. I think you can be sure that SANCO and David Byrne, the Health Commissioner, will take great care to ensure that the issues you have raised are addressed. And could I conclude by making one further point: it's very important that those of you that support initiatives in this area continue to do so and continue to advocate them in all of the fora where you are active. Because we have seen before in the Community that events like those of September 11th can be helpful even though they are horrible events; they are helpful from a certain point of view. But that passes over time, however horrible they were. So it's very important that this conference is not just a conference which then disappears into the mists of the history of the Community, but that we try to keep alive what is essentially a political process, in which the Member States are evolving very fast, but in which also there are all kinds of reasons which could lead things to slow down.

So ladies and gentlemen, I would like to conclude by thanking you once again, and by assuring you that for our part we will be following this matter up. Thank you very much.