

EU and WHO experts discuss influenza pandemic preparedness

Epidemiologists and health experts from 52 European Union and WHO Europe Member States will meet in Luxembourg on 2 and 3 March to review and update national preparedness plans for an influenza pandemic. There has been mounting concern among health experts that the highly infectious strain of avian influenza seen in Asia could mutate into a deadly virus capable of being transmitted from human to human. The two-day meeting in Luxembourg will examine measures to improve the preparedness of public health systems for dealing with such a pandemic. The aim of the meeting will be to help those countries that do not yet have them to draw up plans, and to help those that do to update and improve them. It will identify whether further assistance to countries is needed and, if so, what form it should take. Markos Kyprianou, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection said : "Having the means in place to rapidly identify and respond to the emergence of a pandemic strain of influenza could save many thousands of lives. The avian influenza outbreak in South East Asia has given us not only a clear warning but also time to improve our preparedness. No one can say when the next pandemic will strike. But, should it occur, we need to be properly prepared." In March 2004 the Commission issued a strategy paper outlining how the EU and its Member States could work together to counter an influenza pandemic (see IP/04/432), which was endorsed by Member State health ministers in June 2004 (see MEMO/04/128). The Commission and Member States have also had discussions with the vaccine and pharmaceutical industries on issues such as ensuring availability of vaccines and anti-viral medicines. For more information see:

http://europa.eu.int/comm/health/ph_threats/com/Influenza/influenza_en.htm