The Commission Health Emergency Operations Facility:
for a coordinated management of public health emergency at EU level
Further information on the Health and Consumer Protection DG is available at:
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/index_en.htm

© European Communities, 2007

Reproduction is authorised, except for commercial purposes, provided the source is acknowledged.
The photographs on the cover of this publication may be reproduced within the context of the report. For any other use, prior permission must be obtained from the copyright holder(s).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction........................................................................................................2

Legal basis........................................................................................................3

Public Health Emergency Management Structure.........................4

3 alert phases..................................................................................................4

SANCO Public Health Emergency Management Structure..................4

HEOF activities ............................................................................................6

Communication and Information Tools..............................................7

Surveillance and detection of signal: MedISys.................................7

Early warning and rapid alert systems.............................................8

EWRS...........................................................................................................9

RAS-BICHAT..............................................................................................10

RAS-CHEM..............................................................................................11

Situation awareness: HEDIS and the crisis intranet.................11

HEDIS.........................................................................................................11

The Crisis Intranet....................................................................................13

Vulnerability assessment: MATRIX.....................................................14

Communication equipment ..............................................................15
Each member state is responsible for the safety of its citizens and the management of emergency situations (in case of human and natural caused disasters which may impact public health safety). But communicable diseases and CBRN events do not respect national borders. It is therefore important to ensure a coordinated approach between EU countries for the public health management in emergency situations.

For these reasons the EU Ministers of Health adopted the Health Security Programme, after a number of terrorist attacks in 2001. One of the priorities of this programme is the setting up of a "mechanism for information exchange, consultation and coordination for the handling of health-related issues linked to attacks in which biological and chemical agents might be used or have been used.

In this context two tools were put in place at the very beginning of this activity: a rapid alert system called RAS-BICHAT dedicated to deliberate release of chemical, biological and radio-nuclear substances, and a Crisis room and Communication Centre facility for the management of alerts and emergencies notified by Member States.

Following the constitution of the "Health Threats unit" in 2003, all operations in respect of the Network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases, established by Decision 2119/98/EC of the European Parliament and the Council, were also conducted in this facility which was an appropriate tool to deal with communicable diseases emergencies.

Since its establishment, the Health Emergency Operations Facility is continuously developed to support EU countries to react to situations where cross border coordination and information sharing is justified.
The Commission's mission is currently laid down in the following EU texts:

- **EC-Treaty establishing the European Community (Article 152)**
- **Decision 2119/98/EC of the European Parliament and the Council** setting up a network for the epidemiological surveillance and control of communicable diseases in the Community. This decision addresses the need for co-ordinated action and sharing of information between the Member States and Commission, and it is establishing a mechanism of early warning and response.

- **Public health programme** defining objectives and strands of activities, contributing to the EU capacity to prevent and manage public health crisis.

- **Conclusions of the Health Council of 22 February 2007** on the transitional prolongation and extension of the mandate of the Health Security Committee. This committee deals with preparedness activities at EU level:

  - Preparedness and response to health-related threats resulting from attacks in which biological and chemical agents might be used or have been used;
  - Generic preparedness for health emergencies;
  - Influenza preparedness and response.
Public health incident may occur at any time, and early warning and rapid alert systems are in place to exchange information on incidents within the EU and neighbouring or third countries. Three levels of public health emergency are defined:

**3 ALERT PHASES**

- Small sized events - a green phase: Health Threats Unit on-duty officer manages the response as a part of the regular monitoring mechanism.

- Medium or major sized events - a yellow alert phase: Health Threats Unit manages the response, using enhanced operating procedures.

- Acute crisis - a red alert phase, which can not be managed using normal operating procedures, and where Senior Management decides to activate Health Emergency Operations Facility (HEOF) and SANCO's Public Health Emergency Management Structure.

**SANCO PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT STRUCTURE**

The Health Emergency Operations Facility (HEOF) is a part of SANCO public health emergency management structure, which consists of a Senior Management Team supported by 4 Operational Teams dealing with different aspects of the crisis management. This structure replaces the normal Management Structure for matters relating to the particular health emergency, as long as red level is maintained.
The **Senior management** team is responsible for triggering Public Health Emergency Operations and for the overall management and direction of SANCO's response, and leads the Emergency Management Team. It is liaising with the Commissioner and his Cabinet, coordinating the response and establishing policy lines.

The **Communication** team is in charge of producing press and media messages and interaction with the spokesperson and with the communication officers from other public health authorities (EU Member States, institutions and agencies and relevant international organisations).

The **External interface** team is responsible for liaising with the Presidency, the Council and the Parliament and, if necessary, the Committee of Regions and Economic and Social Committee.

The **Internal interface** team is in charge of coordinating activities with different Commission Directorates General and services through ARGUS, which is the Commission's internal mechanism aiming at ensuring a coordinated and effective management of major multi-
sector crisis, such as terrorist attacks or tsunami like events, that require a reaction at the European Community level.

The **Health Emergency Operations** team, in liaison with the Member States' Ministries of Health, ECDC and International organizations, contributes to the coordination of health emergency management efforts. HEOF validates a level of threat, informs the Member States and the hierarchy on the situation and prepares policy briefings, and facilitates the decision making process concerning necessary measures.

**HEOF ACTIVITIES**

HEOF is intended to ensure the coordination between the Commission, Member States, other associated countries (candidate countries, EEA countries), Agencies, such as European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), European Food Safety Agency (EFSA) and European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products (EMEA), and international organisations (such as WHO) during an emergency situation. Two committees, in which Member States are represented (the Early Warning and Response System (EWRS) committee for the prevention and control of communicable diseases and the Health Security Committee (HSC) dealing with chemical, biological and radio-nuclear threats, and generic preparedness and response issues), are part of the overall coordination structure. The International Health Regulations (IHR) Focal Points group is also associated with this process. HEOF’s role is also to provide the Commission and Member States with an **overview of the situation**.
Regarding its central role in the coordination of the response to health threats, the Commission has set up various tools in order to support EU countries in their effort to tackle with threats from various origins such as communicable diseases, chemical, biological and radiological threats.

These tools are aiming at facilitating communication and providing the right information at the right moment to all stakeholders.

### Surveillance and detection of signal: MedISys

**MedISys (Medical Intelligence System)** is an internet monitoring and analysis system developed by the Commission Joint Research Centre (JRC) for the Health and Consumer Protection Directorate General (DGSANCO) to identify potential threats to the public health using information from the Internet. These ‘threats’ include both communicable disease and chemical, biological and radiological threats which could have a widespread impact on the health of the European Community.

MedISys collects articles from various sources on the Internet. Articles are **classified in pre-defined categories**. Statistics are stored on the filtered categories and an algorithm is used to detect ‘breaking news’ in a given category. Based on the level of new articles and the detected keywords, an **alert** may be sent to key persons by email or SMS.

**Target audience**: MedISys is available in two versions: a restricted version available for public health authorities and a public version.

**URL public version**: [http://medusa.jrc.it](http://medusa.jrc.it)
In order to ensure a rapid and effective response by the EU to a wide range of emergencies, the Commission has put in place several early warning and rapid alert systems.

These systems allow public health authorities in Member States and the Commission to receive and trigger an alert as well as exchanging other relevant information regarding events likely to affect public health at EU-level and coordination of measures.
EWRS is the EU Early Warning and Response System set up to address threats related to communicable diseases.

Under Decision 2119/98/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council and Decision 2000/57/EC, the Member States should inform one another and the Commission about events likely to affect public health at the EU-level. These decisions also regulate the procedure for reporting and for the functioning of the system. Therefore, the EWRS is frequently used for notification of outbreaks, exchange of information and discussion about the coordination of measures among players.

This system will shortly be hosted by the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC). It is closely associated with the information of WHO and other contracting parties required under the International Health Regulations (IHR).

Target audience: members of the EWRS committee (public health authorities)
RAS-BICHAT is the EU rapid alert system used for exchanging information on health threats due to deliberate release of chemical, biological and radio-nuclear agents.

It is a web-based tool that fulfils the same purpose as EWRS (notification of threats, exchange of information and coordination of measures among partners.) The procedures of exchange have been agreed between the members of the Health Security Committee.

Unlike EWRS system, Commission plays a role of moderator. The Commission on-duty officer should acknowledge the message posted by contact points in Member States, authenticate the sender and verify the content of the message, call the sender to get more details and then notify all the stakeholders.

**Target audience:** members of the Health Security Committee
RAS-CHEM

RAS-CHEM is a rapid alert system currently under development. It is meant to link the various poison centres of the European Union and the Ministries of Health for the exchange of information on incidents including chemical agents relevant to terrorism and other events leading to release of chemicals, and consultation and coordination of counter-measures.

As RAS BICHAT only deals with chemical threats in relation with terrorist activities, the Health Security Committee has identified the need of having a warning system which would cover the public health aspects in this area. It should be operated as a forum of exchange of information and advices, used for the identification and the rapid dissemination of information on incidents, outbreaks and illnesses caused by exposure to chemicals, including chemical events relevant to terrorism and other events leading to release of chemicals.

Target audience: EU poison centres and Ministries of Health

Situation awareness: HEDIS and the crisis intranet

HEDIS

HEDIS is a restricted Web-based tool supporting the Member States and the Commission during disease outbreaks and health emergencies, providing an overview of the situation on an identified health threat.

For each new crisis a dedicated sub-portal is generated where stakeholders can find all information related to the threat:

- Relevant news, reports and scientific advice from various sources (Commission, ECDC, WHO, Europe Media Monitor,…)
- Maps locating events
- A logbook presenting a timeline of actions taken concerning the specific threat.
The HEDIS platform also regroups a set of tools especially designed to **communicate and share information**:

- A **forum** for communication between stakeholders
- A **secure document repository** for sensitive document storage
- **Questionnaires** used for asking information to stakeholders on particular subjects and gathering answers
- **Alert systems** (E-mail, SMS, Fax)
- **Calendar** application for event scheduling
- A **notice board** to attract users’ attention on latest and most important events or documents

Some tools have also been developed to allow HEDIS users to **evaluate real or hypothetical situations**:

- **Mathematical models** have become important tools in analyzing the spread and control of infectious diseases and to assist decision makers in taking proper preparedness and prevention measures.
- **Interactive Disaster Analysis System** providing analysis of the surroundings of a given event (population, activities, hospitals,…)
- **Hospitals database** containing location and other information about European hospitals.

Outside crisis periods, HEDIS also provides access to news and documents related to various threats such as chemical agents, Avian influenza, Meningitis,…

**Target audience**: members of EWRS and HSC committees
DG SANCO INTERNAL CRISIS INTRANET

The DG SANCO internal crisis intranet is the place where the Commission decision makers will find all the needed information for the taking of coherent and adapted decisions. All DG SANCO units involved in health emergency management should provide information resulting from their actions.

Target audience: DG SANCO decision makers
**Vulnerability assessment: MATRIX**

**MATRIX** is a web-based tool allowing Member States to **assess their vulnerability** against specific biological and chemical agents. The assessment is based on replies given to a wide range of pre-defined questions related to the threat. It facilitates also their evaluation of level of risk. In addition, MATRIX gives access to:

- A library of guidelines and documents in the field of health threats;
- A table for the classification of events and incidents with health consequences;
- Algorithms applicable for the handling of a crisis;
- Specialised sites, databases and encyclopaedias.

**Target audience:** members of the HSC and EWRS committees
The Health Emergency Operations Facility is composed of two teams, one in Luxembourg and the supporting one in Brussels. The teams dispose of a crisis rooms, a communication rooms and one multifunctional meeting room. These rooms are fully equipped with communication tools such as an audio-conferencing system allowing connection of up to 100 participants, video-conferencing tools (up to 32 contact points), satellite phones (as back up) and a Digital Alert Communication System allowing the sending of SMS, the broadcasting of pre-registered messages, and the organisation on spot of audio-conferences. TV screens also allow screening the media during a crisis.
MORE INFORMATION

Public health Website:
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/health_consumer/publichealth_en.htm
EU health portal
http://health.europa.eu

CONTACT

SANCO Health Threats Unit

sanco-c3-health-threats@ec.europa.eu
+352 43 01 1

European Commission
Directorate-General for Health
Directorate C – Unit C3
L-2920 Luxembourg

HITEC building
11, rue Eugène Ruppert
L-2557 Luxembourg (Gasperich)