



Combating pandemics across Europe and Asia

by Martin Seychell

13 February 2012



Only by working together across international boundaries can Europe and Asia be fully prepared for public health disasters, warns the European Commission

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Recent public health emergencies revealed gaps in our preparedness planning and response strategies and capacities. They made clear that multi-sectoral collaboration and preparedness by critical sectors such as information technology, energy and transport are a key to minimise the effects of a future major health emergency across the society. The 2011 E.coli outbreak in Europe demonstrated that a public health crisis could have major consequences on the economy. Besides the public health consequences, this emergency resulted in losses of more than €800m in the agricultural sector, caused major international trade disruption and mistrust from consumers. Such consequences can even be more pressing in the context of a pandemic.

The H1N1 pandemic, in 2009, caused significant economic and societal challenges. In addition to the health burden and costs, it put heavy pressure on non-health sectors due to school closures, cancellation of events, travel bans and productivity losses. This stresses that, if we want to minimise such impact, multi-sectoral preparedness and better planning and response strategies beyond the public health sector are essential. I very much appreciate organisations like the [Asia-Europe Foundation](#), with its intention to address these particular challenges. The European Commission is also committed to addressing the importance of the collaboration across the critical sectors. In December 2011, the commission presented a legal proposal reinforcing European Union preparedness for and a response to serious cross-border threats to health.

The legal proposal aims to achieve improved coordination of preparedness planning between the 27 EU member states and in particular, interoperability of the planning. We want to enhance business continuity planning in critical and key sectors of the society across Europe. And we will provide for a coordinated public health risk monitoring, assessment and management of cross-border threats of biological, chemical, environmental or unknown origin at EU level. The plan sets up a joint procurement mechanism for medical countermeasures.

Finally, special attention is given to strengthening collaboration with international organisations and third countries, and improving coordination of the implementation of the international health regulations. The proposal is based on our existing legislation on communicable disease control and the activities and work carried out under the health security committee as well as the informal network of the global health security initiative. Let me stress that we cannot predict when the next pandemic or any other public health emergency will strike again. It is, however, our duty to be prepared and tackle it effectively. We can do this by working together, across countries and sectors, to achieve our common goal – to protect the health of our people.

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