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MEPs Criticise Management of H1N1 Outbreak in Europe

On 25 January 2011, the European Parliament's Environment, Public Health and Food Safety Committee (ENVI) adopted a report on the management of the outbreak of H1N1 influenza in 2009-2010. The report highlights important concerns in terms of cooperation by the Member States, independence of the health authorities and transparency. It criticises the disproportionate response to the pandemic and raises concerns about the potential influence of pharmaceutical companies in response processes.

EU Member States' responses to the pandemic were uncoordinated and left individual health authorities implementing different strategies, leaving European citizens confused about their options and the severity of the outbreak. Vaccination programmes ranged from wholesale to none at all (in the case of Poland), which could only increase risks and help the spread of the pandemic.

To further discuss the concerns, on 9 February 2011, the EPP Group in the European Parliament organised a public hearing entitled "H1N1 influenza pandemic: Which lessons to learn for better management and EU coordination with Member States?" The list of expert guest speakers, consisting of representatives from the World Health Organisation, European Commission, European Council as well as national administrations and private organisations, was chaired by MEP, Anne Delvaux.

The hearing discussed important measures, which could help better deal with any future pandemic risks. This included: better general cooperation and coordination between the Member States' health authorities and the European institutions; an evaluation of the Member States' strategies to stock up on vaccinations; and the joint purchasing of vaccinations by the Member States.

MEPs also called for further safeguards to prevent potential conflicts of interest by publishing the names of experts who advise European health authorities. Following cases where this was not done, the report furthermore underlined that under EU legislation, full liability for vaccines must remain with the manufacturer, not with Member States, insisting on complete transparency of the medical products used in case of a medical and pandemic urgency. The report also calls on the World Health Organisation to review its definition of a "pandemic" to consider the severity of an illness, and not only the spread of a virus. To ensure the EU's own risk assessment capacity, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control should also be given the support necessary to assess risks independently, as well as perform its other tasks.

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