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National action plans to deal with and prevent a possible epidemic of bird flu in Europe

Written question No 479 to the Committee of Ministers

Reply from the Committee of Ministers
adopted at the 959th meeting of the Ministers' Deputies (22 March 2006)

I. Written Question No. 479 by Mr Hagberg (Doc. 10752)

Recently the question of what might happen if an influenza epidemic were to break out inside Europe has become a highly topical issue. Concern about a possible influenza epidemic is partly based on all the media attention that the bird flu has been given. In Europe, the bird flu has not yet spread beyond birds. Furthermore, there is little risk that the virus may develop in such a way that human beings are infected. Nevertheless, European countries must be well prepared in the event of a large-scale epidemic.

This would require co-operation and mutual support on the part of all European countries. Each country should also draw up a national action plan for dealing with and preventing a possible epidemic. In Sweden, we have drawn up such a national action plan. The national action plan should clarify questions regarding the purchase and storage of antiviral pharmaceuticals, the capacity of vaccine production to ensure that the whole population is able to obtain vaccine whenever necessary, the introduction of an early-warning system and the provision of well prepared routines for dealing with infected flocks of birds.

In the light of this, I would like to ask the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers which measures it intends to take in order to encourage more countries to draw up national action plans to deal with and prevent a possible epidemic in Europe.

II. Reply by the Committee of Ministers

1. The Committee of Ministers has taken note of Written Question No. 479 by Mr Hagberg on national action plans to deal with and prevent a possible epidemic of bird flu in Europe. It shares the underlying concerns as to the gravity of a potential pandemic of this flu, which is characterised by a high mortality rate. It also welcomed the contribution of the Parliamentary Assembly on the same subject (Recommendation 1725 (2005) "Europe and bird flu – preventive measures in the health field") which it has already brought to the attention of member states.

2. The Committee of Ministers encourages member states to continue action to prevent the animal disease from spreading and to prepare for a possible pandemic, in co-operation between themselves and under the aegis of the relevant international organisations. The World Health Organisation's (WHO) expertise and global recommendations constitute the most competent response to the threat to humans that arises from the spread of avian influenza throughout the world. The Committee of Ministers also strongly supports the initiatives undertaken by the European Union and other international institutions, such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the United Nations Co-ordinator and the World Bank within their respective fields of competence.

3. Should it appear that these measures need to be reinforced, the Committee of Ministers will consider what further action could be taken by the Council of Europe, within its sphere of competence.