Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1317 (1997)[1]

Vaccination in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Assembly observes that the political transformations which brought down the communist regimes in some countries of central and eastern Europe also swept away the existing state structures, especially health systems, which disappeared or were completely reorganised. Often, public health services have deteriorated and health budgets have been greatly reduced.

2. In some countries, the economic difficulties arising from the transition have led to a drastic reduction in employment and income which, accompanied by unsatisfactory dietary standards, high consumption of alcohol and tobacco, adverse environmental conditions and stress, has affected public health in these regions. This deterioration, aggravated by shortage of vaccines and improper management of vaccination campaigns, is responsible for an increased incidence of infectious diseases.

3. The recent diphtheria epidemic in some of the newly independent states is an example of the risks confronting us. Tens of thousands of cases have been reported since the outbreak of the epidemic in 1990, and thousands have died of a disease generally believed to have been wiped out. Other pockets of infection may attain epidemic proportions at any time: poliomyelitis, tuberculosis, tuberculous meningitis, pertussis, etc.

4. The diphtheria epidemic very clearly demonstrated that health risks could not be contained locally. With millions of people now free to travel from one country to another, it has not been possible to halt such epidemics. The eruption of ethnic conflicts producing mass movements of refugees has created new problems in this respect, and the austerity imposed by economic reforms has worsened the situation.

5. The Assembly considers that efforts to improve the immunisation level should not be concentrated solely on the plight of the countries undergoing transition. The immunisation level of populations in western Europe has been steadily declining in recent years. The low percentage of fully vaccinated people, coupled with outbreaks of infectious diseases in the same geographic area, raises fears of major epidemics in western Europe too.

6. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers invite member states:

6.1. to devise or reactivate comprehensive public vaccination programmes as the most effective and economical means of preventing infectious diseases, and to arrange for efficient epidemiological surveillance;

6.2. to grant increased assistance as a matter of urgency, internationally co-ordinated through the World Health Organization (who) and Unicef in particular, to countries suffering from the diphtheria epidemic, in order to supply adequate quantities of vaccines and medicines and train a medical staff qualified to handle and administer the vaccine with the following aims:

a. to achieve a high immunisation level among the population;

b. to allow rapid identification of those contaminated through contact and their standardised treatment;

c. to ensure early diagnosis and immediate hospital treatment of diphtheria cases;

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1. See Doc. 7726, report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Christodoulides. Text adopted by the Standing Committee, acting on behalf of the Assembly, on 19 March 1997.

6.3. to be unsparing in their financial assistance to the various vaccination campaigns conducted jointly by who, Unicef and other bodies to prevent a resurgence and to eradicate diseases such as poliomyelitis, tuberculosis, tuberculous meningitis and pertussis;

6.4. to increase the research and development funds devoted to perfecting prophylactic and therapeutic vaccines against, among others, hiv, malaria, herpes and cancer.

7. The Assembly furthermore invites the Committee of Ministers:

7.1. to define a concerted pan-European policy on population immunisation, in association with all partners concerned, for example who, Unicef and the European Union, aimed at the formulation and observance of common quality standards for vaccines, and to ensure an adequate supply of vaccines at a reasonable cost;

7.2. to call upon member states to ratify the European Social Charter of the Council of Europe, in particular Article 11, securing "The right to protection of health", and to instruct the Charter's supervisory bodies to pay due attention to the fulfilment of this undertaking.