

Hearings of European Commissioners-designate

Vytenis Andriukaitis

Health and Food Safety

Hearing due to be held on Tuesday 30 September at 09.00 hours.



Vytenis Andriukaitis, Lithuania.

EP Committee responsible for the Hearing
Environment, Public Health and Food Safety
(ENVI)

Biography

Born in 1951, Vytenis Andriukaitis holds a degree in medicine and another degree in history. He has practised as a surgeon since 1975. He was a Member of Parliament from 1990 to 2004, during which time he was a member of the Convention on the Future of Europe. A Member of Parliament again from 2008 to 2014, he was Minister for Health from 2012 to 2014.

This is one of a set of Briefings designed to give Members of the European Parliament an overview of major issues of interest in the context of the hearings of the Commissioners-designate. A full set of such Briefings can be found at:

http://epthinktank.eu/commissioner_hearings

Background

The EU's health policy is aimed at achieving a **high level of health protection** by supplementing the policies pursued by the Member States, which have competence for framing health policies. It also seeks to ensure that the protection of human health is 'mainstreamed' into the framing and implementation of the EU's other policies and measures.

EU policy in the field of **public health** relates to the prevention of illnesses and health risks (including the factors underlying poor health such as smoking, alcohol abuse and obesity). It encourages cooperation between the Member States and with international partners (third countries and international organisations).

Health policy is also one aspect of the regulation of **pharmaceutical products** and medical devices, aimed at ensuring EU citizens enjoy high health standards (now part of the Internal Market portfolio), and on cross-border healthcare. The EU's **research** policy (covered by the 'Research, Science and Innovation' portfolio) also has a medical and health component.

Food safety policy, which has been developed in response to food/health crises, seeks to protect the health and interests of consumers in the single market by ensuring that consumer foodstuffs and animal feedstuffs are safe and nutritious. It is based on the precautionary principle as well as risk analysis and traceability. It focuses on an overarching strategy covering all the operators in the food chain (the 'farm to fork' policy), the implementation and monitoring of food and feed product safety standards, and the prevention of potential risks of contamination. This approach to food safety is complemented by rules relating to the components that can be added to foodstuffs (additives and flavourings) and the materials that come into contact with foodstuffs, and by the **labelling** of foods and feed products.

The policies on **animal health and plant health** centre on averting the consequences of serious contagious diseases in plants and animals, and in particular those communicable to humans; they are based on the principle 'prevention is better than cure'.

Besides the EU institutions and the Member States there are, in each of these fields, a range of stakeholders which include: the **Scientific Committees** – and especially the Scientific Committee on Health and Environmental Risks (SCHER) and the Scientific Committee on Emerging and Newly Identified Health Risks (SCENIHR) – the **EU Agencies**, in particular the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC), the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), and the **sectoral organisations**, representing the industries and professions concerned (for example. doctors, the pharmaceuticals industry and the agri-food industry), users and – patient, consumer, animal and environmental – protection groups.

Common to all the fields covered by this portfolio are **monitoring and early warning systems** (which facilitate rapid response) and the definition and coordination of response capacities in situations presenting health risks, whether these arise from diseases, food products (RASFF), plants (Europhyt) or animals (Traces). These mechanisms have been moving towards becoming paperless and interconnected systems (for instance, Traces and Europhyt are soon to be linked). There is also close **coordination** with **international partners and organisations** in these fields (and in particular the World Health Organisation (WHO), the World Organisation for Animal

Health (OIE) and the United Nations Organisation for Food and Agriculture (FAO)).

Treaty base and EP competence

Public health is covered by Articles 4(2)(k), Article 6(a), Article 9 and Article 168 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU).

The EP and the Council can adopt legislation under the ordinary legislative procedure to address the following common safety concerns: quality and safety of organs and other substances of human origin, blood and blood derivatives, veterinary and plant health measures, quality and safety of medicinal products and medical devices, and measures to promote the protection of public health with a focus on serious cross-border threats to health, smoking and alcohol abuse.

Food safety, animal and plant health are covered by Articles 13, 43, 114, 168, 169 and 352 TFEU.

Recent developments

Numerous pieces of legislation have recently been adopted in the field of **health**, relating to:

- organ transplantation;
- patients' rights in cross border health care;
- tobacco products, including electronic cigarettes;
- clinical trials and the fight against falsified medicines and the EMA's pharmacovigilance activities (now under the responsibility of the Internal Market Commissioner);
- serious cross-border threats to health; and
- the Third Health Programme (2014-20), which has four main objectives (promoting health – including by fostering healthy lifestyles, protecting against serious cross-border health threats, contributing to innovative, efficient and viable health systems and facilitating access to better and safer healthcare for citizens).

In the specific area of **food safety**, legislation has recently been adopted on:

- food information to consumers;
- foodstuffs intended for specific groups of people – infants, children and people with special medical needs or particular nutritional requirements (PARNUTS);
- honey (presence of genetically modified pollen and labelling); and
- biocides.

European Parliament

When considering the legislative proposals submitted to it, and in non-legislative procedures, the EP has advocated the promotion and implementation of an integrated **public health** policy covering manufacturing (pharmaceutical) and medical (notably antimicrobial resistance) aspects, as well as exposure to ionising radiation.

In the field of **plant and animal health**, the EP maintained, right up to the conciliation stage, a stance aimed at ensuring the traceability of **products derived from cloned animals** and their descendants with regard to the 2008 proposal on new foodstuffs. It also rejected the 2013 proposal on **plant reproductive material** (seeds) and called on the Commission to withdraw it and replace it with a new proposal (owing mainly to the blanket approach adopted and the many delegated and implementing acts).

The Environment, Food Safety and Public Health Committee is also in regular contact with the **agencies** responsible for the areas within its remit, holds hearings with directors of those agencies and conducts checks as part of the budgetary procedure.

Priorities and challenges

In general terms, in areas for which the Member States have competence or in which competence is shared, the EU can bring **added value** in the form of improving the management of health issues and public health risks. It can also help reduce costs (where there is no coordinated approach and third parties may create competition among the Member States), rationalise responses to emergency situations and reconcile the juxtaposition of national competences and the internal market.

Some legislative proposals are still pending, such as the '**plant and animal health package**' proposed by the Commission in May 2013 to simplify the existing legal framework. This consists of five parts (animal health, plant health, seeds, official checks and the management of EU expenditure in the main agri-food sectors). The EP adopted its position at first reading in April 2014 (rejecting the proposal on seeds). Other proposals were presented by the Commission at the end of the parliamentary term, such as the '**new foodstuffs package**', which aims to update the current regulation (from 1997) following the failure of the conciliation process on the 2008 proposal. The package comprises a proposal for a regulation on new foodstuffs, a proposal for a directive on the marketing of foodstuffs derived from cloned animals and a proposal for a directive on the cloning of certain animals. After negotiations lasting several years, the EP will be asked to decide at second reading on the reform of the process for authorising the cultivation of **genetically modified organisms** in the autumn.

In March 2014, the EP rejected the Commission's draft delegated regulation on the indication of **nanomaterials** in foodstuffs, and asked it to draw up a new proposal which took account of the EP's position.

Further reading

[Public health and food safety](#), Factsheets on the European Union, European Parliament, 2014.

[Health and consumers](#), European Commission website.

Disclaimer and Copyright

The content of this document is the sole responsibility of the author and any opinions expressed therein do not necessarily represent the official position of the European Parliament. It is addressed to the Members and staff of the EP for their parliamentary work. Reproduction and translation for non-commercial purposes are authorised, provided the source is acknowledged and the European Parliament is given prior notice and sent a copy.

© European Union, 2014.

Photo credit: © European Union, 2014.

eprs@ep.europa.eu

<http://www.eprs.ep.parl.union.eu> (intranet)

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank> (internet)

<http://epthinktank.eu> (blog)