



H1N1 flu: more info needed on health risks and vaccine safety

The public needs to be better informed on H1N1 flu risks and how to avoid them, Environment and Public Health Committee MEPs told Health Commissioner Androula Vassiliou on Wednesday. Given the low number of clinical trials done with H1N1 vaccines, MEPs also raised vaccine safety concerns. European Medicines Agency Executive Director Thomas Lönngrén assured them that the risk of side effects was minimal.

Two H1N1 vaccines were given positive opinions by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) on 24 September, and should be available in October, a prospect welcomed by committee chair Jo Leinen (S&D, DE).

Is it safe to kiss?

The need for better communication on flu risks was stressed by Françoise Grosstête (EPP, FR), who noted that there is great confusion as to how the H1N1 virus differs from seasonal flu. Dagmar Roth-Behrendt (S&D, DE) was not impressed with the Commission's work in this area. People want to know "Is it safe to take the metro? Shake hands? Kiss?", she said, adding that the public also need clear advice on who should be vaccinated.

Commissioner Vassiliou replied that the Commission informs and co-ordinates, but it is up to EU Member States to take decisions not least on priority groups for vaccination.

Safe for children and mothers-to-be?

"How much confidence can we have 'fast track' vaccines?" asked Antonia Parvanova (ALDE, BG). EMA Executive Director Thomas Lönngrén replied that H1N1 vaccine is very similar to a seasonal flu vaccine and that safety data can therefore be extrapolated. Furthermore a "robust pharmacovigilance system" will be used, he added.

Clinical trials have been done only on healthy adults, yet children and pregnant women have been identified as priority groups for vaccination, noted Michèle Rivasi (Greens/EFA, FR). "According to the EMA, there is no reason to think that the vaccine is unsafe for those groups and further trials concentrating on children and pregnant women will be carried out", replied Commissioner Vassiliou.

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