COVID-19: EU must step up efforts to tackle medicine shortages

• Increase pharmaceutical manufacturing in Europe
• Create an emergency European pharmacy
• 40% of medicines marketed in the EU originate in non-EU countries

Parliament calls for the EU to be more self-sufficient when it comes to medicines and medical equipment so that affordable treatments are available at any time.

Parliament addresses the root causes of recent medicine shortages in a resolution, adopted by 663 votes to 23 and 10 abstentions. MEPs call for an increased EU response to a problem that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 health crisis across Europe with a direct negative impact on patients’ health, safety and the continuation of their treatment.

Parliament welcomes the new EU health programme EU4Health and asks the Commission to use the upcoming pharmaceutical strategy to ensure that safe medicines in Europe can be made available, accessible and affordable and to examine ways to restore pharmaceutical manufacturing in Europe.

The resolution also calls on the Commission to propose a directive setting minimum standards for quality healthcare systems in member states.

Return to EU independence in the health sector

Priority needs to be given to boosting domestic production of essential and strategic medicines as currently 40% of medicines marketed in the EU originate in non-EU countries, while 60 - 80% of active pharmaceutical ingredients are produced in China and India, MEPs say.

They also mention the need to screen foreign direct investment in pharmaceutical manufacturing plants, which are part of Europe’s critical health infrastructure and encourage the
introduction of financial incentives to persuade companies to produce active pharmaceutical ingredients and medicines in Europe.

Better coordination with and between EU countries

Parliament calls for member states to share best practices in stock management and create coordinated health strategies, including further use of joint EU procurement of medicines. Furthermore, the Commission should create a European contingency reserve of medicines of strategic importance, along the lines of the RescEU mechanism. It should function as “an emergency European pharmacy” in order to minimise shortages. Equal access for all member states should be ensured through a new mechanism of just distribution.

To make medicines circulate more easily between EU countries, they also want more flexible rules on packaging formats, reuse procedures, longer expiry periods and the use of veterinary medicinal products.

Quote

After the vote, the rapporteur Nathalie Colin-Oesterlé (EPP, FR) said: “Public health has become a geostrategic weapon that can bring a continent to its knees. Our dependence on non-EU countries has been exposed by the current pandemic. Certain types of production must be relocated, legislation must be harmonised and cooperation between member states must be strengthened in order to achieve greater solidarity and to regain our independence.”

Further information

 Adopted text will become available here (17.09.2020)
 Procedure file
 EP Research Service: Addressing shortages of medicines
 Guidelines on the optimal and rational supply of medicines to avoid shortages during the COVID-19 outbreak
 Free photos, video and audio material
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