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WEEKLY EU HEALTHCARE NEWS UPDATE

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EU AGREES ON NON-MANDATORY MEASURES AS A RESPONSE TO A NEW WAVE OF COVID-19 IN CHINA

In light of the surging COVID wave engulfing China, European officials managed to agree on travel-related measures such as pre-flight testing, facemasks, and wastewater surveillance. However, the countries may decide whether to implement them individually, which means that the entire agreement at the EU level remains non-binding.

At a crisis meeting in Brussels on Wednesday (3 January), the EU's Health Security Committee (HSC) agreed that the EU must prepare a common approach concerning the current situation of COVID-19 in China. There is well-grounded fear that new COVID-19 variants may spread further after the Chinese authorities suspended the “zero covid” policy. European Union countries have agreed on a coordinated approach to the evolving COVID-19 situation in China, given the increased travel from China to Europe. A majority voted in favour of mandatory testing for COVID-19 before leaving China.

During the meeting, they also discussed measures on personal hygiene and health measures for travellers (including the recommended wearing of masks on flights from China); monitoring of wastewater on aeroplanes; genomic surveillance at airports and increased monitoring and sequencing; increased EU vigilance on testing and vaccination; and discussion of the need to pre-screen Chinese passengers before departure. Nevertheless, due to the fear of retaliatory action from Beijing, the wording of recommended actions is very soft, hence the member states are only „encourage” to undertake further actions.

Source: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2023/01/04/eu-countries-agree-to-demand-covid-19-test-for-travellers-coming-from-china>

BELGIUM BECOMES ANOTHER COUNTRY TO DECLARE A NATION-WIDE FLU EPIDEMIC

On Wednesday (3 January), the Belgian national public health institute Sciensano officially declared the criteria were met to label the current situation a „flu epidemic”, with cases surging to similar levels as the spike of COVID-19.

"The flu has already been back for some time in our country, but now all the criteria are met to be able to talk about a flu epidemic," the institute stated. It explained that a "clear increase" in the number of influenza cases had been observed among general practitioners, as well as in laboratory tests and hospitalizations. The Sciensano institute added that not only the influenza virus, but also the bronchiolitis virus, coronavirus and other respiratory viruses may cause the same symptoms and are currently circulating.

The healthcare sector is already struggling due to the high cases, but experts predict the worst could be yet to come. The peak is expected in three or four weeks, according to Steven Van Gucht, a virologist at Sciensano, who underlined that it is always possible to get a flu shot. He also mentioned that it is good to make sure that enough fresh air is coming inside the apartment to avoid getting ill, especially when hosting guests. He also urges people to stay at home when they fall sick.

Other countries like Germany and Slovakia previously declared an epidemic, and more countries are expected to do so in the coming days.

Source: <https://www.brusselstimes.com/346895/belgium-officially-faces-flu-epidemic-uz-leuven-postpones-non-urgent-care>

WHO REMINDS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES OF HIV-POSITIVE REFUGEES COMING FROM WARZONES

The WHO Global Health Sector Strategy 2022-2030 on HIV has reaffirmed an ambitious challenge for the world - to eradicate AIDS as a public health threat by 2030. However, when unforeseen events such as war occur, achieving health priorities becomes much more difficult.

At the same time, WHO recalls that people with HIV can live longer lives now: in many countries, this is achievable with affordable drugs, established treatment patterns and early diagnosis. Out of the 53 countries in the European Region, Ukraine has been facing the burden of HIV the most. Data from 2021 shows that nearly a quarter of a million Ukrainians have been living with the disease. Certain groups, such as drug addicts, men who have sex with men and sex workers, were at higher risk of infection, just as they are worldwide.

WHO reminds us that a key part of the health response is to provide refugees with the necessary information in understandable language about a range of services available to them. The HIV treatment regimen in Ukraine differs from that used in European Union (EU) countries and includes, among other things, the use of drugs that are not approved in EU countries. Continuation to use effective treatment regimens and avoiding unnecessary changes are the best solutions for patients' health.

Source: <https://www.who.int/ukraine/news/item/27-12-2022-hiv-prevention--diagnosis-and-care-for-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland>

Thank you for your attention!

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