THE FIFTH ESWI INFLUENZA CONFERENCE

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# PRESS MESSAGE

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*Organised by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI)*

(RIGA, LATVIA): Only by ensuring that national and international health authorities, academia, healthcare professionals and pharmaceutical industry forge strong and effective collaborations to improve pandemic preparedness will Europe be able to deal successfully with a new outbreak of pandemic influenza. Issued at the end of a four-day conference on influenza organized by the European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) in Riga, the warning reflects a consensus that a new worldwide outbreak of influenza is just a question of time. "Flu is a moving target and viruses are smart and simply unpredictable", said the chairman of the conference, Ab Osterhaus. "If we want to conquer the disease, we need to use all available technologies and work on collaboration." Data presented at the conference indeed show that only a handful of mutations are necessary to make the H5N1 bird flu virus airborne transmissible in ferrets. Thirty percent of H5N1 variants that have been sequenced might even only require as few as three mutations to become airborne. The other influenza virus strain with known pandemic potential, H7N9, already exhibits three of the properties that are needed for H5N1 to gain transmissibility between humans. In order to assess risks more precisely, we need improved surveillance in regions where mutations are already prevalent.

Discussions at the conference had been opened by Tonio Borg, European Commissioner for Health and Consumer Policy, who emphasized the importance of influenza prevention. "The continued focus on the promotion of vaccination as a key public health tool is both welcome and timely," Mr Borg said. This statement is at the hearth of the Fifth ESWI Influenza Conference. Indeed, the conference gathered organizations of healthcare providers, senior citizens, at-risk patients and public health authorities in a separate programme track called the Science Policy Interface. Remarkable examples of collaboration between various stakeholder groups and their positive impact on public health were presented and discussed, demonstrating the key importance of interacting with stakeholders and managing the dialogue.

The Multiparty Group for Advice on Science (MUGAS) Foundation offered a ground-breaking satellite symposium on the review and statistical analysis of oseltamivir data. Nancy Cox (Centers for Disease and Prevention, USA) opened the session by welcoming the support provided by the MUGAS Foundation for the urgently needed assessment of the efficacy and effectiveness of oseltamivir, one of the major neuraminidase inhibitors used to fight influenza. Although vaccines are cornerstones of public health's arsenal for the prevention and control of influenza, antiviral drugs play an essential role in the fight. Their effectiveness has been the subject of debates for many years, as were early antivirals developed against influenza, such as the M2 channel blockers amantadine and rimantadine, in the 1980s and 1990s. The ongoing debate on the effectiveness of the newest class of antivirals, the neuraminidase inhibitors, has become a hurdle for public health response to seasonal and pandemic influenza.

The aim of the MUGAS Foundation was therefore to offer a thorough, independent and transparent meta-analysis of published and unpublished data from clinical trials, carried during the procedure of licensure of the neuraminidase inhibitors. Preliminary results of the meta-analysis were presented by Joanna Dobson (London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, UK). Her team has been given access to all the requested reports and datasets, including the Individual Patient Data, hence not only the pooled data from the randomized clinical trials. This is a unique asset that makes the MUGAS review stand out from any other analysis of antiviral effectiveness data. The preliminary results of the analysis indicate a highly significant reduction in time to alleviation of major symptoms of influenza. There was also a highly significant reduction in lower respiratory infections requiring antibiotics. The final results of the MUGAS review and statistical analysis of oseltamivir data will be published in a high impact factor scientific journal in the weeks to come.

**If you require any additional information, please contact:**
Mr. David De Pooter
Tel: +32 479 45 74 46
E-mail: david.depooter@eswi.org

*The European Scientific Working group on Influenza (ESWI) is a partnership organization of stakeholders with a clear mission: to reduce the number of influenza victims in Europe.*