

VENICE: Europe's new network for vaccination

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Vaccination is an extremely effective tool in reducing the burden of infectious diseases. There are many vaccine products currently available in Europe. Vaccines developed recently have been introduced according to common European Union (EU)-wide regulatory procedures since 2003, which implies that they are licensed for common indications and population groups across the EU. Nevertheless, European countries often use different schedules, concurrently administer different vaccines, measure vaccine coverage in different ways or in different age groups and have different systems for monitoring adverse events following immunisation.

The public health assessment of newly licensed vaccines is carried out simultaneously but independently in each country in Europe. Although immunisation programmes are devised at a national level, these have an impact beyond borders, especially in a context of free circulation of people and therefore infections within the EU. The enlargement of the EU from 15 to 25 member states in 2004 and to 27 in 2007 is also likely to have increased the variability of this picture.

So far, there have been several projects addressing vaccination from an EU perspective, but opportunities to exchange immunisation programme experiences in Europe have been limited. Most activity has been restricted to projects addressing specific infections or diseases, such as meningococcal disease.

Aims and objectives of the VENICE project

The Vaccine European New Integrated Collaboration Effort (VENICE, <http://venice.cineca.org/>) project was launched in January 2006 with the aim of establishing a European network of experts with experience of working with national immunisation programmes. Currently, there is no monitoring of the success of immunisation programmes in Europe. There are no data collected which would enable detection of any possible differences in safety or effectiveness that would arise from the different uses of vaccines across the EU. In other words, careful comparison of national vaccine schedules will enable experts to see which schedule could be the best one for a specific vaccine, whether the efficacy of vaccine is affected by co-administration of certain other vaccines, and what the most common adverse events following immunisation are for each vaccine. In addition, using the VENICE network, it will be possible to monitor the introduction of the human papilloma virus vaccines and rotavirus vaccines in European countries, as well as influenza pandemic vaccines in the future.

Other specific aims and objectives of VENICE are:

- to improve knowledge about immunisation programmes in the EU,
- to identify and recommend the best indicators for monitoring immunisation programmes,
- to define models of the decision-making process when introducing new vaccines into national immunisation programmes,
- to develop best practice models for dealing with adverse events following immunisation.

Current

work

VENICE is also currently collecting information about national policies concerning the introduction of new rotavirus and human papillomavirus vaccines. The questionnaire is being piloted in five countries and the survey will be launched on the web later this month.

One of the most important sub-projects within VENICE has been the website (<http://venice.cineca.org/>), which provides information and recommendations in order to encourage the use of standard approaches (common case definition, common indicators to evaluate European immunisation programmes) to vaccination surveillance and data collection in participating countries. In the future, the website will also provide regularly updated information on national and regional immunisation programmes, including schedules, vaccines used, vaccine coverage, methods for calculating coverage, systems for adverse event surveillance and management. The site will also publish updates on scientific evidence concerning the effectiveness of new vaccines against rotavirus, human papillomavirus, pneumococci, meningococci and varicella/VZV. It will provide access to information about vaccine products from national and European regulatory bodies such as the European Agency for the Evaluation of Medicinal Products and to relevant information on vaccination from international organisations such as the World Health Organization and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC).

To assist with improving general knowledge about vaccination programmes, national gatekeepers were asked to write a short report describing the immunisation programmes in place in their countries. These reports are being published in the ECDC's Vaccines & Immunisation newsletter (http://www.ecdc.europa.eu/Health_topics/VI/VI_newsletter.html). An overview of the results of this survey will be published on the VENICE website in 2007. A brief summary will be generally accessible and the complete set of information collected will be available to the national gatekeepers.

VENICE is supported by the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection (DG SANCO). The project has funding for 3 years, and at the end of that period, the entire activity will be taken over by the ECDC in its capacity as the EU agency coordinating infectious disease work. There are 28 European countries participating in the network: 26 EU member states (all except Malta) and two EEA/EFTA countries (Iceland and Norway). In each country, several people in public health institutions have been identified and will be involved: a gatekeeper responsible for the project at national level and three contact points.

Beside its links with the ECDC, VENICE is collaborating with other European networks and organisations on vaccine-preventable diseases and immunisation issues, including Commission-funded projects like EUVAC.NET (<http://www.euvac.net>), VACSATC (Vaccine Safety – Attitudes, Training and Communication) and the Brighton Collaboration (<http://www.brightoncollaboration.org>), in order to be complementary, to avoid overlapping activities and to facilitate dissemination of relevant data to the vaccination network.

The first VENICE workshop was held in Malta in April 2006, together with the EUVAC.NET annual workshop; the next one will be organised in spring 2007 and will also include a session dedicated to presenting the results of the DG Research-funded project POLYMOD (Mathematical Models to support Policy-Making), which will be posted on the VENICE website.