

Political Failure: Many Will Die

European Commission European Patients Federation Health News features Politics Swine Flu



Jean-Daniel Chiche (LEFT), Rui Moreno (CENTRE) and Andrew Rhodes hold the three signed copies of the Declaration of Vienna which brought a pledge on Patient Safety from healthcare professionals, industry representatives and patient safety groups

A warning that Europe could face a large number of unnecessary deaths due to a shortage of intensive care facilities will be presented to the European Commission in Brussels next week.

The EU executive is being urged to organise cross border finance or face the possibility that an expected swine flu pandemic could leave seriously ill, elderly or accident victims without lifesaving support.

Leaders of the European Patients Federation representing associations across the 27 member states will report at a meeting in Brussels that only urgent action by the Commission to ensure funding at national and regional levels to meet the challenge of an H1N1 flu pandemic predicted to put thousands of lives at risk in the coming weeks and months.

A shortage of intensive care beds affects every member state and is a global problem likely to become a care crisis, according to experts at the European Society of Intensive Care Medicine (ESICM) congress in Vienna this week.

Experts reported that intensive care units are already running at 95% to 99% capacity. A pandemic expected to affect young people this winter would require around 25% of intensive care facilities and they would be a priority.

Data on the Australia and New Zealand pandemic this year has shown that as beds are taken by pregnant mothers, children and young people there will be no facilities for elderly or accident victims and life saving operations will need to be postponed.

According to Australian specialist Dr Steve Woods the recent pandemic meant nursing staff having to work double shifts. "What has to be remembered is that if specialist nursing staff get the flu beds have to be closed down. This is a global problem and it needs to be addressed with urgency. What has helped in the past is patient pressure on politicians and that is now happening in Europe."

At Vienna the European Societies representing intensive care medicine and patient safety groups signed a declaration that, ESICM president elect, Dr Andrew Rhodes said commits the signatories "collectively" to work together to put pressure on politicians to come up with funding.

The conference heard that every country in Europe is short of intensive care beds, trained staff and equipment. "It is quite clear that to get funding across borders the European Commission has a pivotal role to play.

There is a need for more trained staff and patient safety is at risk from medical errors resulting from shortages of staff, training and equipment, he said. It is one thing to throw money at new technology but the key issue is for the IC specialists to work together and ensure that staff are properly trained and do not make mistakes.

"What we do not know is what is going to happen in the next few months if H1N1 spreads. Every year we have seasonal flu affecting around a million people. This year it is likely to be two to three million who will be mostly young and a percentage of those will need to be in intensive care.

"What also needs to be remembered is that if a nurse gets the flu then one or two beds have to be taken out of service," he told a press conference.

Dr Rhodes added that politicians need to be brought to the realisation that funds need to be allocated. "There is a shortage of ECMO (Extra Corporeal Membrane Oxygenation) facilities to treat the really seriously ill. In my country, the UK there are only seven beds and in Portugal only one.

"People are not willing to provide funds up-front. Politicians have to be persuaded to take this seriously. We have a fantastic argument for change but extracting money from politicians is always a problem. That is also something that has to be changed," said Dr Rhodes.