Epi-Rhin – Cross-Border Warning System for Communicable Diseases (Germany, France, Switzerland)

Project term
Since 12/2000

Project partners
- German-French-Swiss Upper Rhine Conference / Conférence Franco-Germano-Suisse du Rhin Supérieur; Joint Secretariat / Secrétariat Commun (Kehl, Germany).
- Local and regional public health agencies in Switzerland, Germany and France with public health service physicians acting as regional coordinating contacts in Liestal/Canton of Basel-Land, Stuttgart/Baden-Württemberg State Health Office; Landau/State of Rheinland-Pfalz, Institute for Hygiene and Infection Protection, and Strasbourg/DRASS-Regional Direction for Health and Social Affairs.

Summary
Epi-Rhin is a decentrally organised cross-border warning system for infectious diseases intended to complement national warning systems already existing. The project is aimed at further improving the flow of information in the Rhine area among authorities working under the umbrella of the “Health Policy” working group of the Upper Rhine Conference and at shortening reporting channels.

Under the project, in each of the three countries involved (France, Switzerland, Germany) a person responsible for “Epi-Rhin” has been nominated who receives warning messages from his or her own country and passes them on to his or her local colleagues in the neighbouring country. The decision as to whether under “Epi-Rhin” a warning message on diseases or outbreaks has to be passed on to one of the neighbouring countries is taken on a decentral level. An evaluation is not carried out. For the experts involved in the project, seminars are being held at regular intervals in order to compare the rules and procedures for the major tasks and to foster personal contacts.

The project is intended as a permanent activity. Plans are being made to establish an internet-based information platform for experts.
Background / Starting position

The existence of infectious diseases forces health care actors to jointly think about ways of how to deal with these challenges and urges them to take preventive measures in order to be able to react as quickly as possible and by taking a cross-border approach. The German-French-Swiss border region as well was lacking a communication system and knowledge about the existence and occurrence of infectious diseases in the partner regions.

In the Upper Rhine area, epidemiological phenomena are to be observed regularly. In winter and springtime, isolated cases of meningitis occur. Every year influenza waves are to be recorded. Tuberculosis patients may have had contact with family members or colleagues on the other side of the border.

Due to recent events in the food industry, special attention has moreover to be paid to food-borne infectious diseases.

Due to the geographic position of the Upper Rhine area at the intersection of very busy transit routes in road, air and railway traffic, the possibility of introducing diseases from outside has constantly to be taken into consideration.

Experiences show that sometimes three months and more elapse between the diagnosis of an infectious disease and the moment in time it is reported and the affected social environment (family, colleagues etc) is warned. Epi-Rhin is intended to contribute to a clear reduction of these periods of time.

Project description

General

The project “Epi-Rhin – Cross-border warning system of communicable diseases” which is being carried out in the German-French-Swiss border region was started in December 2000. It is intended as a permanent activity which means that a project end is not envisaged. The project was initiated by experts of the “Health Policy” working group of the Upper Rhine Conference with the objective to establish a permanent warning system.

Epi-Rhin is a decentrally organised information system which in a very quick and effective way improves cross-border knowledge about communicable diseases. The Epi-Rhin
partners, in most cases public health officers on both sides of the Rhine, receive warning messages from their own country and pass them on to their local colleagues in the neighbouring country. Under Epi-Rhin, the German, French and Swiss health authorities will complement the existing national warning system (e.g. listeriosis, meningitis, influenza waves) through direct contacts they maintain on the local level.

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<th>German-French-Swiss Upper Rhine Conference in Kehl</th>
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Illus. 1: Organisational structure of the project

The project is not being sponsored by the EU. The costs for setting up the warning system were rather low anyway. The main costs incurred are personnel costs which are being borne by the employers of the persons working on the project.

Objectives of the project

The project is aimed at the cross-regional exchange of epidemiological information. The intention was to complement the existing warning systems in the health care sector and to further improve the flow of information among authorities in the Rhine area working under the umbrella of the “Health Policy” working group of the Upper Rhine Conference. It is not intended to replace the existing national warning systems.

Contents and development of the project

To achieve this objective, a cross-border warning system for communicable diseases called “Epi-Rhin” was therefore launched on the initiative of the “Health Policy” working group of the Upper Rhine Conference. This system functions in the following way:

1. In each of the three countries involved, a person responsible for “EPI-Rhin” is nominated.

2. The responsible contact persons receive the warning messages from their own country and pass them on to the partners in the corresponding neighbouring countries.
3. If a contact person receives warning messages from one of the two other “EPI-Rhin” officers, he or she will vice versa pass the message on to the corresponding colleagues in his or her own country.

In Germany, these are public health officers, in Switzerland Canton Physicians and in France “médecins inspecteurs de santé publique”.

The decision as to whether a warning on diseases or outbreaks has to be passed on to one of the neighbouring countries is made on a decentral level. The person responsible for dealing with warning messages decides if measures to be taken in connection with the diagnosis of epidemics and the identification and treatment of contact persons might also be required in one of the partner countries.

The general rule is that under EPI-Rhin a warning message must be given if a communicable disease occurs in a cross-border context such as:

- Several cases occur in the region close to the border,
- The place of residence of one or of several patients is in one of the partner countries,
- The place of residence of one or of several contact persons who might require examination or treatment is in one of the partner countries,
- The source of infection is in one of the partner countries.

The system corresponds to national data protection rules. It does not replace any national or international warning systems. As an additional measure, seminars are regularly held for experts involved in the project in order to compare the rules and procedures for the most important tasks and to foster personal contacts.

Public relations

The project does not have to be made known to the public since it will be sufficient if the corresponding experts in the border region are informed about the project. The physicians of the cantons and/or public health officers maintain continuous contacts with each other so that knowledge about the existence of the warning system was disseminated in an unproblematic way.

The seminars are covered in the media, not least because of the topicality of the issues treated such as bioterrorism or avian flu.
Outcomes

The main outcomes of the project are:

- Compared to the international warning system, a considerable acceleration of the information flow on individual events of cross-border relevance: The official transfer of a warning message used to take up to three months before reaching its objective, now such a message can be passed on within hours.

- The drawing up and continuous updating of a list of contact partners in the public health service in the partner countries as well as

- The development of knowledge about and technical understanding of organisation forms and processes in the public health service of the partner countries.

Evaluation

Neither an interim report nor an evaluation had been planned since the project partners finance the project with their own means and do not have to give account to any external financiers. Since the beginning of the year 2006, the Swiss partner, however, has been keeping a list to document the cross-border warning messages.

Summary/Prospect

“Epi-Rhin” is a decentral information system aimed at a quick cross-border exchange of information on epidemiological knowledge which is relevant for the public health system. The innovative character consists in the fact that the relevant health care actors have succeeded in establishing, promoting and maintaining a system of contacts between public health institutions in three countries including a quick warning system on communicable diseases.

It is also planned to set up an internet-based information platform. This should be no internet platform for the citizens but a sort of forum for experts (in particular doctors working in the field of infectious diseases). Due to the workload of the project partners, this project, however, had to be put on hold for a while.

Today, Epi-Rhin serves as an official committee of experts of the “Health Policy” working group. Cooperation with other expert committees has been intensified. So for example the 2006 seminar was carried out together with the “Health Reporting” expert committee on the topical issue of overweight epidemic among adolescents.
Website of the project

The project does not have a website of its own. The website of the Upper Rhine Conference, however, contains a press release on the “Epi-Rhin” project:

http://www.oberrheinkonferenz.de/de/themen-und-projekte/gesundheit/projekte/epi-rhin/ (in German)

Literature / Publications:


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