

European businesses not properly advised on how to prepare for flu pandemic

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A new report entitled Business Continuity Planning and Pandemic Influenza in Europe, published by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), has found huge gaps and differences across Europe in the level of advice given to businesses to prepare for a possible influenza pandemic.

The economic impact and disruption to business during a flu pandemic is likely to be substantial. The report's authors have concluded that the advice on preparedness given to businesses in the non-health sector by European governments and independent organisations, such as consultancy firms, academic bodies and trade unions, is insufficient to ensure that the private sector is equipped to deal with a pandemic.

Out of 30 governments surveyed, over a third offered no advice at all and only 8 provided significant levels of advice. In addition, much of the guidance in the countries evaluated relies on private consultancies. However, such firms charge fees for their services, which are unaffordable for many businesses, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises.

Dr Richard Coker, Reader in Public Health at LSHTM and one of the authors of the report said, "We suggest that public and private advisory organisations take immediate action to develop more comprehensive guidelines. Moreover, guidance should be explicit about corporate social responsibilities and actions should be coherent with corporate strategic goals, operational planning, and national strategies."

The report found that advice is lacking and inconsistent in many areas that are crucial to ensure preparedness in case of a pandemic. Only 10 countries provide planning to support human resources and the range of estimates suggests that between 15 - 50% of employees will need to take an extra 5 to 14 days sick leave in the event of a pandemic. These unusually high rates of absenteeism will severely disrupt normal activities and put considerable pressure on businesses to remain operational, especially on those operating in essential services such as banking, draining and sewerage, energy communications, water, transport and waste collection.

Other areas of advice which the report considers as lacking or inconsistent include:

- Management of employees suspected to be ill at work
- Measures to minimise the spread of the virus in the workplace
- Acquisition and distribution of protection equipment and antiviral medication
- Legal issues arising under the circumstances of an influenza pandemic
- The development of business recovery plans

The authors of the report advise that businesses take the necessary measures to develop a clear overview of the possible risks and impact of a pandemic on their resources and business activities and plan accordingly.

Sandra Mounier-Jack, Lecturer at LSHTM commented, "This report demonstrates that most strategic efforts made so far have been directed at preparing public health systems and as a result the non-health sector

has been neglected."

"This has the potential to result in unequal levels and inconsistencies of preparedness in the business sector, with important implications for all of Europe," added Alexandra Conseil, Research Fellow at LSHTM.

Source: London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

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