

Poland and the H1N1 Flu: Calm and Unvaccinated

A/H1N1 in Poland

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Global Research, November 15, 2009

[Wirtualna Polska](#) 10 November 2009

Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Science and Medicine](#)

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Despite vocal criticism and an outbreak in Ukraine, the Polish government doesn't plan to buy the A/H1N1 vaccine.

Despite a serious outbreak of swine flu in neighboring Ukraine, the Polish government played it cool last week. Polish Health Minister Ewa Kopacz announced that she was not planning to stock up on swine-flu vaccine until it had been properly tested.

"The A/H1N1 vaccine is being produced by three companies, none of which has been able to assess its long-term effects. Their testing lasted a relatively short amount of time. It is not known whether [the vaccine] is safe for children and pregnant women," the health minister explained at a press conference last week.

Critics of the minister's decision expressed surprise that the European Commission's clearance of three of the swine-flu vaccines for distribution in early October had not been enough to win her trust. Nor was the World Health Organization's October 30 recommendation of the vaccines, including for pregnant women. Vaccinations, meanwhile, have already begun in France, Italy, Germany and the Czech Republic.

At the same time, there seems to be little cause for panic. Many specialists have stressed that the swine flu virus is in fact more benign than seasonal flu. According to Poland's National Institute of Public Health, 193 cases of swine flu have been confirmed in Poland to date, with no deaths.

"There are currently eight cases of A/H1N1 in Warsaw," Wiesław Rozbicki, spokesperson for the Voivodship Sanitary and Epidemiological Station in Warsaw, told WBJ. Cases of swine flu are expected to become more common between January and March.

The situation across the border

In Ukraine, the swine flu outbreak caused nationwide panic – schools were closed, travel restricted and public meetings banned. Although conflicting assessments abounded, a late-week statement by Ukrainian authorities put the number of registered cases of flu at 478,000, with 81-87 deaths. The government had had problems determining how many of these were actually swine flu; there were 17 confirmed cases of A/H1N1, with four deaths.

Although the WHO has not recommended the closure of borders or travel restrictions to Ukraine, calling these ineffective measures, Slovakia closed two pedestrian crossings with Ukraine and introduced medical check-points at others.

Polish PM Donald Tusk called on the European Union to help Ukraine fight A/H1N1 last week. "The character of this threat demands that rapid action be undertaken at the EU level," Mr Tusk wrote in a letter to European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso and Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt.

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