

Stepping up European measles surveillance

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For many years *Eurosurveillance* has made it a point to publish articles on measles outbreaks and measles prevention and control in Europe. The purpose has always been to increase awareness about this dangerous and potentially fatal infectious disease and highlight opportunities for preventive measures. Measles transmission has been firmly re-established in some European Union (EU) Member States [1]. It is astonishing to see that the EU has become an exporter of measles to the rest of the world, threatening to undermine years of efforts to eliminate endemic transmission of the measles virus. Visitors to Europe are now advised to immunise their infants as early as from six months of age [2,3] in order to protect them from a disease that can result in complications and lead to severe sequelae such as brain damage and death. All this happens despite the fact that measles can be prevented through vaccination with two doses of a measles-containing vaccine, optimally the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine, and that measles can be not only eliminated (less than one notified confirmed endemic case per million population) but also eradicated.

The conditions for eradication are favourable: humans are the only reservoir for the measles virus, the vaccine is safe, inexpensive and produces life-long immunity, diagnostic tests are both specific and sensitive, all infected people develop symptoms, and there are no chronic carriers. Eradicating measles would represent a major public health achievement, well worth the investment it requires. For the EU, the first step towards eradication of measles is effective control within its own borders. Finally, eradication will be the result of elimination of transmission on all continents.

However, given the current epidemiological situation, continued awareness and efforts are needed. Although measles transmission peaks during the winter and early spring in Europe, the many mass-gathering events that take place during the summer in Europe offer favourable conditions for the spread of the virus between countries here and to countries in other continents. Therefore all those who plan to attend mass gatherings in Europe, such as the World Youth Day on 16 to 21 August in Madrid, Spain, should ensure that they are protected against measles.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) has taken initiative to step up measles surveillance in Europe. *Eurosurveillance* welcomes this initiative, which comprises the *European monthly measles monitoring* [4]. This online publication was launched on 13 July 2011 and promises to provide timely updates on measles outbreaks and endemic transmission in Europe based on the findings of active surveillance. This should help to raise public awareness, generate political will and increase public health resources for fighting an infectious disease that should long ago have been dispatched to the annals of infectious disease control.

References

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