

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 32 (2005)
Heft: 6

Rubrik: Official DFA information

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Bird flu and influenza pandemics

The World Health Organisation (WHO) believes it is possible that a global flu pandemic will break out in the next few years caused by a virus related to the current strain of avian flu virus (H5N1). While some media reports on the matter are alarmist, there is no cause for panic at the present time.

We are currently in phase 3 of the WHO six-stage Global Influenza Preparedness Plan. At present there is only a latent risk to humans in countries in which bird flu has been detected if they are in close contact with infected birds and/or their excretions (faeces and secretions). Well-cooked poultry and cooked eggs do not represent a health risk. The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (FOPH) lists other possible precautions on its website (www.bag.admin.ch).

In the future, should the virus mutate in such a way that it infects humans and be easily transmitted from person to person, local clusters of disease can be expected (phases 4 and 5 according to the WHO plan).

If these clusters cannot be contained, it would probably lead to an internationally spreading epidemic among humans, which the WHO would then officially classify as a pandemic (phase 6). This is not the case at the present time.

In the event of a pandemic breaking out, it would take several months before sufficient numbers of vaccinations could be made available. Tamiflu® and Relenza® are currently the only medicines on the market that are effective against influenza viruses and are only available on prescription. However, no clinical trials have been carried out to assess how effective flu medication is in treating bird flu in humans. Like many other countries, Switzerland is now stockpiling Tamiflu® medication. In principle, these reserves are intended for the Swiss population and will only be handed out in an emergency, i.e. if a pandemic breaks out.

In accordance with the principle of territoriality, local authorities are responsible for ensuring the health of the population – no matter what their nationality. By mid-2006, the WHO aims to set aside 3 million courses of Tamiflu® (donated

by the Roche pharmaceutical company) for countries unable to stockpile it themselves. These 3 million treatment courses would be used to contain restricted local clusters of disease (WHO phases 4 and 5). If – as with the outbreak of SARS in 2003 – the emerging epidemic can be contained relatively quickly, this amount should suffice. Nonetheless it cannot be ruled out that these measures will prove fruitless.

People in countries that might not have access to (sufficient stocks of) Tamiflu® for use in a pandemic may be advised to take precautionary measures themselves. At present some countries are experiencing delivery problems, although Roche is endeavouring to unblock these bottlenecks. Anyone considering purchasing Tamiflu® from Internet-based pharmacies should take care to ensure they are buying from a reputable source. It should also be remembered that Tamiflu® should only be taken under medical supervision.

By contrast, private purchasing of medication appears unnecessary in countries whose domestic stockpiles of Tamiflu® are sufficient to treat the maximum expected number of infected peo-

ple in the event of a pandemic (approx. a quarter of the population, by WHO estimates). The FOPH therefore advises people living in Switzerland against stockpiling Tamiflu® themselves.

Up-to-date information on the avian flu situation can be found on the FOPH (www.bag.admin.ch) and WHO (www.who.int) sites. The Swiss Federal Office of Public Health has also set up a telephone hotline which can be called during Swiss office hours for further information:

+41 31 322 2100.

Political Division VI, DFA

New rules governing citizenship

The revised law on citizenship comes into force on 1 January 2006. Under the revised law, fees levied by cantons and communities for ordinary naturalisation must only cover costs incurred. Most of the changes are related to facilitated naturalisation and renaturalisation.

Cost-covering fees

Until now, there was no legal provision that defined the fees for ordinary naturalisation. Communities and cantons were therefore free to levy high charges for this procedure and, for example, index such charges to the applicant's income and assets. From 1 January 2006, however, new breakeven fees for ordinary naturalisation will be introduced. This means that cantons and communities may only levy fees that cover the cost of the procedure and their administrative costs. The new regulation governing fees will be applied to applications ruled on after 1 January 2006. Applications ruled on before this date will remain subject to the existing regulations.

For details of the fees for facilitated naturalisation or renaturalisation, contact your nearest Swiss embassy or consulate.

CAISSE SUISSE DE COMPENSATION

Notice from the Caisse Suisse de Compensation (CSC) to all voluntary insurance contributors.

The January 2001 reform of voluntary contributions to the AVS/AI scheme (old-age and survivor/incapacity insurance) passed by the Parliament made a number of important changes: the scheme was closed to new members living in EU countries, the statutory contribution rate was increased from 9.2 percent to 9.8 percent, the degressive scale was eliminated from the contribution table, the minimum contribution was doubled, and an administrative charge amounting to 3 percent of the statutory contribution was defined for members. Also, the disqualification period was cut from three years to one. These changes have led to a sharp reduction in member numbers. Also, contributors resident in the EU aged under 50 at 31 March 2001, can no longer be insured by us after 31 March 2007.

In light of the above we regret to inform you that the CSC has decided to close the AVS/AI offices in

Lyon, Dusseldorf, Milan, London, Montreal, Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and Sydney. The closures will take place in stages and will be complete by the end of 2007. Existing files will be gradually transferred to the Geneva office, which will administer them in future. We will be writing to you personally with more details at the appropriate time.

We are aware that these changes may cause some concern. However, you may rest assured that we will take all necessary steps to maintain the quality of our services.

Members' files which are already administered in Geneva will be unaffected by this restructuring.

This notice does not affect recipients of benefits.

For further information, please contact the AVS/AI office of the CSC for your country of residence.

You may also wish to consult our website at www.avs-ai-international.ch, which has full information on AVS/AI and voluntary contributions.

Caisse Suisse de Compensation, Geneva Management



BIOMETRIC DEADLINE POSTPONED AGAIN

This year we have published information about the biometric passport and the deadline set by the USA for biometric passports in several issues of "Swiss Review". The USA has once more postponed the date for biometric passports by another year – from 26 October 2005 to 26 October 2006.

Persons with machine-readable passports (Model 03) issued before 26 October 2006 can now enter or transit the USA even after 26 October 2006. Passports issued after 26 October 2006 must contain biometric data. In summary, therefore, only persons who are planning to travel to the USA after 26 October 2006 without a visa and who do not hold a machine-readable passport (Model 03) issued prior to this date require a biometric passport.

Binding information on entering the USA is available from US representations or online at www.unitedstatesvisas.gov.

Further information is also provided at: www.fedpol.ch, "Brennpunkt"; www.dhs.gov/us-visit

Issues 1/05 – 4/05 of the "Swiss Review" (www.revue.ch).



Simplification of regulations governing naturalisation for persons of Swiss origin

The rules governing naturalisation for persons of Swiss origin will be simplified from 1 January 2006.

For example, from 1 January 2006 children born out of wedlock to a Swiss father and a foreign mother are entitled to Swiss citizenship by birth, provided they are legally recognised¹ by their Swiss father before they reach the age of majority.

Under the same provision, children born out of wedlock before 1 January 2006 to a Swiss father and a foreign mother may apply for facilitated naturalisation before their 23rd birthday. Young people above the age of 22

may apply for facilitated naturalisation if they have close ties with Switzerland.

Foreign children whose parents (or one of whose parents) have lost Swiss citizenship (e.g. because the mother lost her Swiss citizenship through marriage to a foreigner), are now eligible for facilitated naturalisation if they have close ties with Switzerland.

Under the new law, foreign children with a Swiss mother who have close ties with Switzerland may also apply for facilitated naturalisation if the mother acquired Swiss citizenship through marriage and was Swiss before, or at the time of, their birth.

Women who married a foreign national before 1 January 1992 and lost their Swiss citizenship as a consequence, can now apply

for renaturalisation at any time provided they have ties with Switzerland. The manner in which they originally acquired Swiss citizenship is no longer relevant.

Persons who have forfeited Swiss citizenship (e.g. persons who were born abroad and failed to report to a Swiss authority before reaching age 22) or relinquished it voluntarily can now be renaturalised even if they are resident abroad. The only condition is that they must prove close ties with Switzerland.

If you have any other questions, contact your Swiss embassy or consulate abroad.

Internet:

www.bfm.admin.ch (Federal Office for Migration, Berne)

www.eda.admin.ch/eda/g/home/emb/addch.html (addresses of Swiss representations abroad)

Legalisation of cannabis consumption

The "Pro Jugendschutz gegen Drogenkriminalität" (PjgD) committee has launched a federal initiative "for a sensible cannabis policy". The committee comprises doctors, psychologists, prominent personalities, representatives of law enforcement authorities and the business sector, and members of parliament, and aims to lobby for a sensible policy on cannabis and formulate solutions that address this aim.

The initiative calls for the addition of a new Article 105a to the Constitution, legalising and decriminalising the consumption of cannabis. People who consume cannabis and are in possession of cannabis for their own



Cannabis soon for everyone?

consumption would not be penalised. The Swiss Government would issue regulations governing who was permitted to grow, manufacture, import, export and trade in cannabis. Furthermore, the Swiss Government would be charged with the task of implementing appropriate measures to protect young people against this drug. The sale of cannabis to minors as well as the advertising of cannabis would be prohibited.

NEW PEOPLE'S INITIATIVES

No new people's initiatives have been submitted since the last issue.

You can download signature forms for current initiatives from www.admin.ch/ch/d/pore/vi/vis10.html

VOTING:

Dates of forthcoming referenda in 2006

12 February / 21 May / 24 September / 26 November

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¹ The relationship with the child is recognised as legally valid if the child is registered in a Swiss civil register. A relationship with the child also exists if an irreversible legal judgment has been issued on adult paternity.