

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 78 (2012)
Heft: [5]

Artikel: Skin cancer rates sharply increase
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-944063>

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Swiss tackle the threat of animal diseases

BSE, bird flu, foot and mouth, bluetongue, swine flu - it's been an active decade for animal diseases and Swiss authorities are now preparing for the next wave.

As veterinary experts know, it's not a question of if the next big disease outbreak happens but when, something that the new Swiss animal health strategy aims to address.

Although Switzerland is widely regarded as a best practice example in the area of animal health, global developments make vigilance essential.

Sixty per cent of human pathogens are of animal origin. Recent experience with the H1N1 outbreak remains fresh in the public's memory. Increased surveillance is necessary to quickly detect any new event, to implement a rapid response and to block the pathogen where it appears.

The Federal Veterinary Office strategy, developed in conjunction with the cantonal authorities, includes improved disease testing at all stages from farm to food plant.

Known pathogens from tropical countries are likely to spread northwards. The carriers of these pathogens are more and more able to survive the winter in non-tropical countries. For example: Rift Valley fever, existing in Africa, is transmitted by mosquitoes now able to survive the winter in Europe; they could colonise non-tropical countries. African horse sickness, related to bluetongue which has already appeared in Switzerland, is another devastating virus waiting in the wings. With climate change and increased trade and movement, Switzerland has to be prepared for the future. This means prevention has to reach beyond the borders of well-resourced countries. Support for countries where pathogens still exist has to be developed.

It will be a win-win situation because it helps alleviate poverty and improve general health in developing countries, while at the same time it reduces the threat for the country providing the support.

Switzerland signed an accord with the World Organisation for Animal Health agreeing to contribute SFr200,000 per year over the next three years to the global fund for the health and well-being of animals. The money will be used to support veterinary services in developing and emerging economies.

As part of national strategy preparation measures, the Swiss authorities will carry out a simulation exercise testing the response to an outbreak of a highly contagious animal disease.

Swiss farmers who lost livestock in the 2008 bluetongue outbreak were compensated to the tune of 90 per cent of the value of the animals destroyed.

from swissinfo

Skin cancer rates sharply increase

Some 2,000 cases of skin cancer are diagnosed in Switzerland every year, making the country the most affected by this cancer in Europe. Diagnosis rates of melanoma have sharply increased over the past two decades and skin cancer is now fourth on the list of cancers most affecting the Swiss.

A study of cases between 2004 and 2008 found that skin cancer rates had increased more in men (up 80 per cent) than in women (up 50 per cent) over the previous 20-year period. In the four years between 2004-08, 21 cases per 100,000 women were recorded compared with 23.4 cases for men. Seven per cent of skin melanoma among women and ten per cent among men were diagnosed at an advanced stage.

from swissinfo

Politicians accused of doublespeak on languages

Swiss politicians fail to recognize the value of multilingualism when the languages spoken are not the national tongues or English, a study found.

From the 1960s until the 1990s, discussions in parliament focused on ensuring equality among the official languages, German, French, Italian and Romansh, as well as dialogue between the language groups.

A turning point came in the second half of the 1990s, when English became part of the debate on languages. One question was whether it should be taught in schools as the first foreign language ahead of German, French or Italian.

At the same time, political parties realized that immigrants were staying. So they emphasized the importance of learning an official language as part of the integration process. This came at the expense of immigrants' mother tongues. Politicians ignored the fact that Switzerland had become a land of immigration with ten per cent of the population claiming a language other than German, French or Italian as their mother tongue.

Pilot projects have been initiated across the country to encourage children to learn the local language as well as the one spoken by their parents. The command of that language is a precondition for learning other languages well. Fluency in languages other than the national languages or English should be recognised as an additional qualification.

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