Letter

How the EU vaccine troubles could have partially been prevented ten years ago

Anniek de Ruijter
University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Law, Law Centre for Health and Life, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Political failure that harks back to swine flu

The political troubles for the EU over the delayed roll out of vaccines across the European continent are far from over. Yet, the current story was foretold with the EU handling of the Swine Flu outbreak in 2009 and everything that did not happen afterwards. At the time, some Member States, particularly also the UK, hoarded vaccines, which caused a panicked EU response [1]. In the beginning, this left some eastern European Countries with no vaccines and other countries with less. Due to this lack of EU coordination and solidarity among the Member States, many of them paid too much for vaccines they ended up not needing. To ameliorate these failures, the EU created an ad-hoc and voluntary system for vaccine distribution, so that Member States could offload Swine Flu vaccines that were bought in excess [2].

After the Swine Flu outbreak, the EU floated the idea of more power and capacity to jointly procure vaccines in cases of health emergencies to the Member States. Not only for a voluntary system, but a system where they could have had the centralized power to determine roll out schedules based on medical need. But the Member States only wanted to agree to a voluntary system [3], where they themselves in the end would have the final say over the number of vaccines to purchase and the actual funding to contribute. The explanation for this is that health is a classical welfare state issue, and to centralize powers in this area in the EU, would diminish the power for this is that health is a classical welfare state issue, and to centralize powers in this area in the EU, would diminish the power for this to happen. Yet the current problems are caused by precisely this reflex for a return to nationalism and ‘go at it alone’ mentality that we witnessed in the Swine Flu outbreak. The failures we are now witnessing could have, at least to some extent, been prevented. Swine Flu should have been a better lesson for the EU. Members States: if you want the EU to be better prepared for a major health emergency, you have do it – and get it – together, before the crisis strikes.

Declaration of Competing Interests

Dr. de Ruijter has nothing to disclose.

References

[1] J. Sturcke and O. Bowcott, ‘Drug companies face european inquiry over swine flu vaccine stockpiles’ the Guardian (11 January 2010) < http://www.theguardian. com/world/2010/jan/11/swine-flu-h1n1-vaccine-europe > accessed 25 February 2021.

[2] Reuters, ‘EU governments seek to offload flu vaccines’ www.euractiv.com (1 January 2010) < https://www.euractiv.com/section/health-consumers/news/eu-governments-seek-to-offload-flu-vaccines/ > accessed 25 February 2021.

E-mail address: a.deruijter@uva.nl

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lanepe.2021.100083

© 2021 The Author. Published by Elsevier Ltd. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)
[3] de Ruijter Anniek. EU Public Health: countermeasures to Swine Flu. EU Health Law & Policy: the Expansion of EU Power in Public Health and Health Care. Oxford University Press; 2019. <https://oxford.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780198788096.001.0001/oso-9780198788096-chapter-5> accessed 25 February 2021.

[4] J Deutsch. The EU’s Coronavirus vaccine blame game. Why so Slow? Politico (4 January 2021) <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-vaccination-blame-game-is-it-all-the-eus-fault/> accessed 25 February 2021.

[5] Jensen Mads D, Kelstrup Jesper Dahl. House united, house divided: explaining the EU’s unity in the Brexit negotiations. JCMS: J. Common Market Stud. 2019;57:28.