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GLOBAL STOCKPILE OF H5N1 VACCINE "FEASIBLE", WHO MEETING CONCLUDES

Geneva — Countries and vaccine manufacturers agreed on Wednesday in a meeting at the World Health Organization (WHO) that creating a stockpile of H5N1 vaccine, and separately developing a mechanism to ensure broader access to pandemic influenza vaccine for developing countries in the advent of a pandemic, may be feasible.

"We have taken another crucial step forward in ensuring that all countries have access to the benefits of international influenza virus sharing and pandemic vaccine production," said Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO. "All countries will now be better placed to protect the public health security of their people and the world at large. Such cooperation is welcome and is consistent with the International Health Regulations, which soon come into force."

Meeting at WHO headquarters on 25 April, countries which have experienced human H5N1 infections, donor countries, and vaccine manufacturers from industrialized and developing countries agreed that both scientific evidence and international political commitment support further efforts to examine whether and how to establish a stockpile of H5N1 vaccine and a mechanism for broader access to pandemic vaccine when the next influenza pandemic occurs.

Participants heard that the Strategic Advisory Group of Experts on Immunization (SAGE) had concluded last week that recent scientific studies on H5 vaccines had shown them to be safe and immunogenic, and that it was realistic to expect that vaccines offering cross protection (against immunologically related but different viruses not contained in the vaccine) could be developed.

The meeting also heard from representatives of vaccine manufacturers in developed and developing countries that they were willing to work with WHO to pursue the possibility of an H5N1 vaccine stockpile and a mechanism for broader access to pandemic vaccine. The International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers and Associations (IFPMA), the industry organization which represents research-based pharmaceutical companies, added that it forecast increased manufacturing capacity for seasonal influenza vaccines in the next three to five years, to meet potential growing demand.

Following the meeting on Wednesday, WHO will set up expert groups to focus on the details of how to create, maintain, fund and use an H5N1 vaccine stockpile, and the Organization will continue to consult with appropriate partners and Member States on the development of mechanisms for broader access to pandemic vaccine.

Participants agreed that the work on virus sharing, H5N1 vaccine stockpiles, access to pandemic vaccines and other means of strengthening pandemic preparedness must all be based on the International Health Regulations (2005), the overarching framework to ensure global health security.

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