

## **HMA Working Group of Communications Professionals**

### **Principles to streamline information sharing between communication professionals in HMA**

#### ***Introduction***

The European Heads of Medicines Agencies (HMA) is a network bringing together the various national competent authorities (NCAs) for the regulation of human and veterinary medicines. In 2007, the HMA established a Working Group of Communications Professionals (WGCP) to help develop communications expertise and to share good practice.

As part of its role, the WGCP has been exploring how information can be better shared around the network. The recent flu pandemic provided opportunities for information-sharing, and some lessons have been drawn from this experience.

The WGCP has therefore decided to set down some principles to help streamline the sharing of information between communications professionals in various NCAs, particularly during any crisis situation. The WGCP recognises that there are already some information-sharing mechanisms in place between other staff at NCAs, for example among pharmacovigilance experts sharing safety data. This document is designed to complement, and in no way to replace, these existing arrangements.

#### ***Why share information?***

There are a number of reasons why it is useful for communications professionals to share information:

- To maximise public health protection of European citizens – the better equipped all NCAs are with the full facts, the better we are able to protect consumers.
- To ensure consistency of facts – we speak with more authority if we are consistent on the facts, and early dialogue can help identify and resolve any differing factual information.
- To avoid the unnecessary appearance of divided opinion. Sometimes NCAs will disagree, and that is both to be expected and acceptable. But often poor communication in a crisis can lead to the appearance of difference where in reality there is none. This adds to the confusion, and unnecessarily damages public confidence.

#### ***Triggers for information-sharing***

A balance has to be struck when sharing information. If too much information is shared too frequently, then important information can become lost in the background noise. If too little information is shared too infrequently, then important information may never be communicated.

It is difficult to be prescriptive about when communications professionals should share information, and in general common sense and experience will indicate when the time is right. However, as a rule communications professionals should be encouraged to share information in the following circumstances:

- In an international public health incident (eg pandemic flu)
- In an incident occurring in one or more countries which is likely to cause international interest perhaps due to its significance, or to its possible spread (eg the TGN1412 clinical trial)
- A culturally or politically sensitive issue. For example, vaccine scares appear to be more culturally sensitive in some countries than others; whilst problems caused in one country by products manufactured elsewhere are likely to be politically sensitive
- An issue relating to a product widely used in more than one country, irrespective of the route by which it was licensed
- An issue known to be newsworthy in another country, irrespective of whether it is newsworthy in one's own

In addition to these trigger points, the WGCP considers it reasonable for any communications professional to request briefing from another on a subject of interest. In responding to such requests, due consideration will of course be given to confidentiality and data protection.

### ***Practical steps for information-sharing***

Having identified that they have information to share, a communications professional is then faced with the challenge of what specifically they should pass on. Again, common sense will apply, but as a general rule the following approach is suggested:

- The communications professional will produce a short written summary in English of the information including:
  - Key data/facts released to the media and public
  - Next steps, and any forward timelines (eg time of next press conference)
- This information will generally be circulated by email to all members of the WGCP
- Where appropriate, the email may be followed up by a personal phone call to the WGCP member(s) in any countries likely to be particularly affected by the issue in question
- If necessary, the chair of the WGCP (or in their absence any other member) may convene a teleconference of WGCP members to share further information.

### ***Conclusion***

This document aims to provide a framework to assist communications professionals from across the HMA network in sharing information. However, it is only a framework, and is no substitute for common sense or the benefit of experience. Provided due regard is taken of confidentiality issues, nothing in this document should be seen as an impediment to sharing information where an individual deems that would assist in the management of a given situation.