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Czech-U.S. group aims to better prepare states for emergencies, illness

By Lisa Nuch Venbrux
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Imagine going into work tomorrow and finding a quarter of your colleagues absent. Picture "closed" signs on shop doors, locked classrooms and empty sidewalks.

These may seem like images from a disaster film, but, according to many public health experts, such scenes could become reality in the Czech Republic and elsewhere under just the right — or wrong — circumstances. In response, Czech and U.S. experts met at the Czech Bar Association in Prague March 9 for the First Annual Workshop of the International Collaborative for Public Health Emergency Preparedness (ICPHEP).

The conference is the first such event, a trans-Atlantic partnership launched last year by public health lawyer Judy Munson and law professor Michael Seng.

Munson, who calls "knowledge sharing" the essence of her goal, says the project plans to partner medical, legal and public health practitioners and students to discuss preventing and responding to public health crises. These could include outbreaks of flu or salmonella, as well as natural disasters and bioterrorist attacks.

Addressing an audience of professors, nurses, scientists, lawyers and students, speakers from the World Health Organization (WHO), the European Union's European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) and other organizations emphasized the need for coordination in North America and Europe.

"Health is maybe the weakest point in the EU," said Roman Prymula of the University of Defence and Czech delegate to Stockholm's ECDC.

Cleaning up messy decision-making processes, unclear mandates and hazy laws is needed before European authorities can respond effectively in an emergency, Prymula added.

Despite focusing on international concerns, speakers also laid bare preparations being made by the Czech Republic.

Dr. Antonín Malina, director of Prague's Institute for Postgraduate Medical Education, pointed out that the country has already faced public health crises, such as the floods of 2002 and outbreaks of food contamination. But, so far, the country has been spared any major catastrophes.

This could change quickly, and some are skeptical about the country's ability to respond to an emergency.

"I don't think we are at all prepared to deal with anything major," Seng said. While the Czech Republic faces no special risks, he explained, its location in the center of Europe makes its response important.

One "major" concern is a flu pandemic. Given fluid EU borders and international travel, a flu virus or other illness would spread fast.

Dr. Radoslav Olejník of the Health Ministry agrees with those who say it's not a matter of if a flu outbreak will occur, but when. The ministry updated the National Pandemic Preparedness Plan 2006 in November.

The plan, based on WHO recommendations, provides measures "to reduce ... health, social and economic impacts," for example, getting information out, strengthening hospitals and distributing medicine. According to the document, a serious outbreak could infect 3 million people in the Czech Republic, killing 12,000.

Olejník says the country is "prepared very well" but still needs a communication plan as well as a system to deliver vaccines and antivirals to the public.

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