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Note for the Editors: The Official Medicines Control Laboratories (OMCL) Network was formed in 1994, under the aegis of the Council of Europe, to co-ordinate the administrative and technical activities of the OMCLs, to facilitate the exchange of knowledge amongst authorities in Europe and to influence future development through harmonised common standards, based on the legal requirement for testing medicinal products. For more information, please go to: www.edqm.eu.

14th ANNUAL MEETING OF EUROPEAN NETWORK OF OFFICIAL MEDICINES CONTROL LABORATORIES (OMCL), VIENNA, AUSTRIA, 25-29 May 2009

The European Directorate for the Quality of Medicines & HealthCare (Council of Europe) held its 14th Annual Meeting of the Official Medicines Control Laboratory (OMCL) Network in Vienna from 25 to 29 May 2009. This conference was organised with the help and support of the Austrian OMCL - Österreichische Agentur für Gesundheit und Ernährungssicherheit (AGES) and was held on the AGES premises in Vienna, Austria.

185 participants from 35 countries, representing 61 OMCLs attended the general meeting as well as different specialised sessions during which the quality control of medicines through independent and coordinated testing and sampling plans at a European level was discussed, in particular in the field of pharmaceuticals, biotech products and the official control authority batch release of human vaccines, human blood and plasma derivatives and immunological veterinary medicinal products. As in previous years, issues of particular importance were the exchange of experience and results, policy and guideline development for fostering mutual recognition, quality assurance and implementation of databases to encourage work and information sharing.

The issue of counterfeit medicines was once again a topic of major interest and several presentations targeted key problematic and testing approaches. OMCL Network members are currently playing a role in the drafting of a Council of Europe convention aimed at combating counterfeit medicines which will safeguard against pharmaceutical crime and threats to public health and thus help to guarantee the quality and safety of medicines and medical equipment for patients in Europe and beyond. Network members are working together with experts in the legal field to formulate this convention.

Many policy documents and guidelines were updated to reflect current working methods. New technical guidelines for the validation of computerised systems were adopted, documents which will provide guidance for the calibration of laboratory equipment and assure the comparability of test results within the Network.

In addition, discussions centred on the quality monitoring of stockpiled medicines for public health emergencies as well as the batch release procedures related to vaccines for use in pandemic situations.

Also in the sessions concerning Official Control Authority Batch Release (OCABR) of human vaccines and medicinal products derived from human blood, the Network paved the way for further information sharing and mutual recognition between the Network members and beyond, enhanced by the creation of a secured Network database for OCABR batches which will allow for a greater transparency and knowledge sharing.

Similarly, the OMCLs involved in the control of veterinary immunological medicinal products exchanged their activity reports and experiences in the application of articles 81 and 82 of Directive 2001/82 amended. OMCLs also discussed the implications of the recent publication of Directive 2009/9 as concerns the testing methods and the SOPs.

The five day meeting and the numerable topics covered illustrate the wide range of activities in which OMCLs are involved and via which they contribute to guarantee an optimal level of quality of the medicines available throughout Europe.

A political organisation set up in 1949, the Council of Europe works to promote democracy and human rights continent-wide. It also develops common responses to social, cultural and legal challenges in its 47 member states.

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