

MARK JOHNSON (GERMANY)

Europe lacks medical countermeasures for responding to a CBR terrorist attack

Over the last years, the threat that terrorists could resort to using weapons of mass destruction (WMD) such as chemical, biological, and radiological (CBR) agents in Europe has been credibly asserted by institutions such as the European Commission, Interpol, the United Nations and NATO. However, whilst the assumed level of probability that a WMD attack will actually happen remains low, the CBR medical countermeasures (MCMs) required to respond to such an incident are expensive to develop and involve a lengthy process till they can be ready for market.

If Europe wishes to be prepared, it must open a dialogue with industry on how to finance this high-cost sector.

The Commission has shown great foresight in the area of CBR and nuclear (N) preparedness, as demonstrated by its CBRN "green paper" initiative in 2007 and a corresponding CBRN action plan. CBR medical countermeasures are a vital component of this, and the action plan justifiably includes the request for each EU country to assess the required amounts and types of MCMs it would require in case of an incident involving high-risk CBRN materials. It also requests the Commission's Health Security Committee to consider an EU-wide coordinated approach to create stockpiling, production capacity and funding for a technology platform to secure MCMs.

Yet despite this, the EU 27 continue to be vague about their interest in MCMs and their budgeted ability to procure them. As a result, industrial stakeholders who develop and manufacture MCMs scale their resources and attention to the US market, where their business models stand better chance of survival.

Indeed, US agencies responsible for CBR preparedness are better at clearly spelling out which vaccines, antivirals, immunoglobulin, etc. will be funded for development. This gives industry a greater guarantee that their products will have a market, and which will be put in reserve in the US Strategic National Stockpile.

Without initiating open dialogue between EU member states and industry in a similar way, there is a grave danger that officials will rely solely on past experience gained from pandemic influenza and antibiotic preparedness. While there are some similarities to WMD preparedness which can apply, there are also great differences.

For example, flu vaccines and antibiotics are widely used to combat regularly and naturally occurring illness, even without

threat of WMD terrorist activity. In fact, some analysts estimate that by 2015 annual government spending worldwide on pandemic influenza preparedness will reach \$10 billion, with the global antibiotics market reaching \$40.3 billion.

Accordingly, the market is lucrative and predictable, organic market function exists and large pharmaceutical/biotech corporations actively engage in wider investment. By comparison, there is little organic demand for many CBR MCMs; thus, a market only exists when governments perceive a WMD terrorist threat and communicate their associated requirements for preparedness measures. Even for MCMs already developed, it is not feasible for businesses to create idle manufacturing capabilities and seek product licensing in the event that an emergency might happen.

Industry thus awaits European governments to clearly communicate its perceived threat of WMD terrorism and which corresponding MCMs are needed as part of their preparedness plans. However, this type of communication in Europe is not happening. So the market is highly unpredictable and unprofitable, hence, industry cannot afford to devote its expertise and resources.

This situation leaves Europe unprepared for the worst that CBR threats would inflict. As John Abbott, chairman of the bioterrorism prevention steering group at Interpol said in 2009: "The threat of bioterrorism is for real and it is deadly as it has the potential to kill hundreds, thousands or even millions, but many nations still underestimate the need to prepare for such an attack."

So, how can Europe balance this unpredictable demand with a clear need for solutions?

First, it is time that European governments call industry to the table and communicate its requirements for MCMs. Equally, if offered this opportunity, then

industry will have to clearly indicate to European governments how, when, and if such requirements can be fulfilled. And if the threat estimates and the current capabilities do not match, then governments will then need to partner with industry to develop and manufacture those MCMs vital to a responsible WMD preparedness plan. Supply cannot simply be turned on when governments are ready to receive.

Yet dialogue alone will not create industry response to European demand. In many cases governments will have to find ways to encourage businesses to develop and make their MCMs readily available.

The low-probability/high-risk characteristics of CBR threats make structuring a viable MCM industrial base difficult. Only through an open public-private dialogue between European governments and industry can the right balance be found. The necessary exchange of view can best happen in a neutral, balanced, and non-biased environment, where the voice of industry is representative and diverse expertise across the range of CBR can be given. ■■

Published Dec 11 by SecEUR, Brussels, Belgium

Author

Mark Johnson

Head of MJ Lawrence Consulting. MJ Lawrence is based in Munich, Germany and independently facilitates communication between government and industry; specializing in the international availability of medical countermeasures against CBR agents.



Address of the author:

Tel.: +49 (0)162 446 8922
E-Mail: johnson@mjlconsulting.eu
www.mjlconsulting.eu