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Implementation of the revised bill on epidemics in Switzerland

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Theme:	<i>Other (Public health)</i>
Title:	Implementation of the revised bill on epidemics in Switzerland
Category:	<i>Key developments in implementation</i>
Abstract:	As of 2016, a new bill on epidemics will enter into force in Switzerland. It paves the way for the creation of national programmes to tackle important problems relating to infectious diseases, such as antibiotic resistant bacteria and infections in hospitals. What is more, it aims at improving cooperation between the federal and cantonal governments.
Description:	<p>A key problem in Swiss health and social policy is coordination between the federal and cantonal governments in order to achieve coherent policies for the country as a whole. OECD reports on the Swiss health system have repeatedly pointed to this problem. In order to respond to this criticism, the national and cantonal governments have undertaken a number of efforts that aim at better harmonisation of health policies. One important example of this is the new bill on epidemics.</p> <p>The revised Swiss bill on epidemics, adopted in a popular vote in 2013, will enter into force in 2016. It contains a number of changes concerning the response to infectious diseases, such as viruses (measles or rubella) or bacteria (antibiotic resistant bacteria in hospitals). Specifically, the law has the following new features:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It allows for the implementation of national programmes concerning antibiotic resistant bacteria and infections in hospitals. Such programmes would aim at controlling the use of antibiotics in humans and animals, in order to reduce resistance against antibiotics. 2. The law aims at improving coordination between the federal and cantonal governments. Particularly, the reform enhances the leading role of the federal government, which is to define national policy goals regarding infections – including the role of the cantons – and to prepare for emergencies. The cantons are responsible for implementation. In order to unify the application of the law, a national coordination body has been created. The degree to which the federal government can instruct the cantonal governments varies considerably. With regard to common infections, such as tuberculosis, HIV or a restricted outbreak of measles, each canton implements the law independently of federal directives. Yet, if there is a worst-case scenario, a pandemic that threatens domestic and external security such as the Spanish-Influenza epidemic of 1919, the national government takes the lead and the cantons have to follow. 3. The new law restricts the possibility for the cantonal government to make immunisation mandatory. Prior to the reform, the cantons could issue a law making immunisation against certain diseases mandatory. Under the revised law, it will be more complicated to create such a

	<p>regulation. In order to create an obligation for immunisation, a specific population group needs to be determined, and mandatory immunisation is restricted to that group. What is more, there needs to be a significant threat to public health.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. The revised law entails more specific directions concerning the collection of data and their protection. For example, the revised law specifies that doctors and laboratories need to quickly report infections to public agencies in order to allow for a quick response to the disease. At the same time, the revised law adapts these procedures to current data protection legislation. 5. Based on these revisions, the law also aims at improving international collaboration between Switzerland and other countries regarding pandemics. Since the revised law stipulates more precisely the responsibilities of the federal and cantonal governments, the federal government expects that the revisions will improve coordination between Switzerland and international organisations and institutions.
<p>Outlook & Commentary:</p>	<p>According to the Swiss national government, the revised bill on epidemics adapts the country's strategy to the demands of today's public health policies. However, concrete applications of the bill are especially in the field of antibiotic resistant bacteria and virus epidemics, each only with a limited scope.</p> <p>This bill does not cover a core social policy issue, but rather a public health topic. Nonetheless, it is important because it reforms the way in which the government responds to infectious diseases, which is of high interest to countries neighbouring Switzerland because infections can easily travel across borders and render coordinated responses vital.</p> <p>It remains to be seen whether the new law improves Switzerland's capability to react to dangerous pandemics, which require efficient coordination of different levels of government and large-scale immunisation programmes. There may be problems for two reasons. First, a coordinated response to this sort of problem has not been implemented for a long time. In the context of the Ebola-outbreak in Western Africa in 2014, experts expressed doubts that all cantons would be prepared for an emergency and respond to the federal government's demands appropriately. What is more, any actions to make immunisation mandatory are dependent on political approval, which might take a long time to obtain and would lead to a politicised decision-making process. Therefore, reactions to imminent crises could be delayed and comprehensive prevention impeded.</p>
<p>Further reading:</p>	<p>BAG. 2013. Das neue Epidemiengesetz: Fragen und Antworten. Bern: Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern EDI, Bundesamt für Gesundheit BAG, Direktionsbereich Öffentliche Gesundheit.</p> <p>BAG. 2013. EGP-Factsheet. Bern: Eidgenössisches Departement des Innern EDI, Bundesamt für Gesundheit BAG, Direktionsbereich Öffentliche Gesundheit.</p> <p>BR. 2010. 10.107 Botschaft zur Revision des Bundesgesetzes über die Bekämpfung übertragbarer Krankheiten des Menschen (Epidemiengesetz, EpG). Bern: Bundesrat.</p>

	<p>Gehrig, Matthias, Tobias Fritschi, and Kilian Künzi. 2009. Regulierungsfolgenabschätzung zur Revision des Epidemiengesetzes - Schlussbericht. Bern: Büro BASS.</p> <p>Helblinga, P., U. Gabathulerb, Th. Rothe, and Jean-Pierre Zellwegerd. 2009. Die Tuberkulose in der Schweiz: Epidemiologie, Überwachung und Meldung. Schweiz Med Forum 21: 487-491.</p> <p>Koch, D., J. L. Richard, J. Hanhart, T. Eckert, and S. Eigenmann Schüttel. 2013. Die Schweiz eliminiert die Masern. Bundesgesundheitsblatt-Gesundheitsforschung-Gesundheitsschutz 56 (9): 1297-1304.</p> <p><i>(English translations of some of these documents and the information regarding the new law can be found here:</i> http://www.bag.admin.ch/themen/medizin/03030/03209/03210/index.html?lang=en<i>, last access, July 22, 2015)</i></p>
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