

## **Lessons learned from the deadly heatwave in France.**

### **Introduction**

#### What's happened?

In summer 2003, the European continent underwent an exceptional heatwave. France was certainly one of countries most affected by this natural disaster. French weather services forecasted very high temperatures through France with temperatures in some regions exceeding 40 Celsius on several consecutive days. August was the hottest and deadliest that France had seen in 150 years.

According to a 2004 Senate report, the heatwave claimed 14,802 lives in France during the first three weeks of August, and the vast majority were people over the age of 75 years.

#### Reasons of the heatwave

Extensive investigations at the highest governmental levels were conducted alongside national shock and mourning for thousands of people who died, many of them unnecessarily. At the height of summer most health professionals including doctors as well as civil servants take their vacation. Furthermore the Minister for Health failed to return from vacation and there was a failure in implementing essential emergency measures. The 2004 Senate report stated that, "although our country excels in healthcare, the lag in prevention is now obvious."

According to Mr Stéphane Mantion, an official of the Red Cross at this time, the French family structure is more dislocated than elsewhere in Europe: "these thousands of elderly victims didn't die from a heat wave as such, but from the isolation and insufficient assistance they lived with day in and day out, and which almost any crisis situation could render fatal."

### **Lessons learned from the heatwave in France.**

The purpose of this note is to highlight the lessons learned and initiatives implemented since the heatwave which claimed ~15,000 lives.

Since 2003, France's government is extremely vigilant as soon as the temperatures exceed 35 Celsius. Improved cooperation between the Health Ministry and the French weather services is evident and as expected, health officials recommend regularly drinking water to avoid dehydration or overheating. Also there is an advisory for those over the age of 65 years to give periodic updates to family and loved ones and request help if needed.

The Heatwave National Plan (Plan national canicule) was developed as a consequence of the national tragedy. The plan includes four levels of caution that are dependent on regional pre-defined temperature. Each level guides the implementation of a range of actions by health and social care sectors.

- 1) The First Level is activated during the summer months, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of June to the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, and becomes the baseline for that period.
- 2) The Second Level is activated when there is a 60% chance of a heatwave within the next 72 hours. Graduated measures can be established by local authorities.
- 3) The Third Level is activated when regional threshold temperatures have been reached. Strong and emerging measures must be established by both the French prefects and the Health Ministry.

- 4) The Fourth Level is activated when there is a severe or prolonged heatwave. A crisis centre must be established and the coordination is reinforced between the highest governmental levels, regional authorities and national and local NGOs. The mass media and the French Army must play a key role in this plan in order to alert and protect the French citizens.

At the end of the heatwave, the government decided to create a day of solidarity for older persons. On this day, French workers and employers contribute financially to this governmental initiative. Money is collected for ageing projects. In case of another heatwave, the Ministry of Labour will establish adapted working conditions for companies.

Finally, organizations such as the French Foundation or the French Red Cross strive to develop programs in order to provide help to older persons suffering from isolation and heatwave over the last ten years.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the 2003 French deadly heatwave had a deep impact on the local and national policies. The general public is continuously informed and aware throughout the summer. Vigilance, prevention and reactivity seem to be the key works to avoid another heatwave in France.