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Nordic Public Health Preparedness *Report dated 2003-06-23*

Introduction

A Nordic Public Health Preparedness Agreement was signed in Svolvær, Norway, on 14 June 2002. The purpose of the agreement is to promote co-operation among the Nordic countries with regard to the planning and development of public health preparedness in order to provide more effective responses to emergencies and disasters.

The agreement prescribes that the Nordic health ministers and other interested parties shall meet regularly to discuss matters related to that purpose. The health minister of the country currently presiding over the Nordic Council of Ministers is responsible for ensuring that such meetings take place.

Background

Via their respective government authorities, the Nordic countries have since 1975 exchanged information about their work on emergency preparedness. Since the start of the 1980s, this has occurred primarily at annual Nordic conferences on public health preparedness. At the conference in Finland in year 2000, a more concrete and binding form of co-operation was discussed. Based on those discussions the annual conference in 2001 proposed the establishment of a working committee, dubbed the Svalbard Group, to develop more specific proposals for Nordic co-operation in this area. The chair of the Svalbard Group is held by the country scheduled to arrange the next annual Nordic conference on public health preparedness.

In response to the events of 11 September 2001 in the United States, the health ministers of Denmark, Norway and Sweden met in Copenhagen on 26 September 2001. In connection with that meeting, the Svalbard Group was requested to expedite its work and present suggestions with an initial focus on preparedness for terrorist activities involving nuclear (atomic), biological and chemical agents [abbreviated N (A), B, C agents].

The health ministers also agreed to call for a meeting of all five Nordic health ministers at the end of November that year. The meeting was held on 28 November 2001, and it was agreed that the Nordic countries from that day forward would, upon request and to the extent of their

capacity, assist each other in the event of an emergency or disaster. It was also decided to request the Svalbard Group to develop both short- and long-term proposals for expanded co-operation among the Nordic countries, and to present those proposals to a ministerial meeting in Oslo on 5 March 2002. In addition, six subcommittees with representatives from all the Nordic countries were set up to investigate possible short- and long-term measures within the following areas:

- principles and procedures for co-operation
- preparedness against atomic/nuclear incidents (A/N preparedness)
- preparedness against biological incidents (C preparedness)
- preparedness against chemical incidents (B preparedness)
- purchasing and logistics co-operation
- care and treatment capacity.

The Svalbard Group presented its proposals at the ministerial meeting in Oslo on 5 March 2002. They were approved by the ministers with a few minor additions and modifications. Also, two additional areas of importance were suggested for inclusion in the expanded co-operation:

- Education
- Civil-military co-operation.

The following activities have been planned and/or implemented:

Principles and procedures for co-operation

- A telephone list has been created and kept up-to-date so that the Nordic health ministers can readily contact each other in emergency situations. The list is supplemented with the telephone numbers of information directors (or the equivalents) at the various health ministries, along with telephone numbers that can be used to contact public servants in emergency situations. Sweden has offered to lend encrypted telephones to the other Nordic health ministers.
- A Nordic Public Health Preparedness Agreement was signed at Svolvær, Norway, on 14 June 2002. Its purpose is to promote:
 - co-operation among the Nordic countries with regard to the planning and development of public health preparedness in order to provide more effective responses to emergencies and disasters
 - planning for emergency preparedness
 - mutual assistance when one or more of the signatory countries experiences an emergency or catastrophe.

The agreement specifies the obligations of the signatories and the duties of officials.

The signatory countries are required to:

- provide assistance to each other upon request
- inform each other as soon as possible concerning measures that are planned or have been implemented

- promote co-operation and remove potential obstacles (national laws, directives and other legal requirements)
- provide opportunities for co-operation, education and the sharing of experience
- strive to expand the level of co-operation
- inform each other of relevant changes in emergency preparedness regulations, including changes to national laws.

Duties of officials

- The health ministers shall meet regularly to discuss matters related to the agreement. The health minister of the country currently presiding over the Nordic Council of Ministers is responsible for ensuring that such meetings take place.
 - The responsible authorities shall maintain direct contact with each other.
 - The responsible authorities shall annually evaluate the development and implementation of the agreement.
- A Nordic Handbook on Public Health Preparedness is in the process of being written. Among other things, it will describe the organization of preparedness in the various countries, and define terms and concepts in order to increase understanding of their organizations.

Preparedness for atomic/nuclear incidents (A/N preparedness)

- Previously established co-operation for protection against radiation has improved.
- A network of clinicians in the five countries, with physicians qualified to treat radiation injuries, has been established.
- Work is under way to develop and co-ordinate biological dosimetry (a method for measuring how much radiation an individual has been exposed to, using chromosome analysis and other techniques). This includes exploring the possibility of using the laboratory of the Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority ("STUK") in Finland by special arrangement.

Preparedness for biological incidents (B preparedness)

- A final decision on a declaration regarding co-operation in matters involving smallpox, in accordance with the Nordic Public Health Preparedness Agreement, is expected to be made at the meeting of the Nordic Council of Ministers on 19 August 2003.
- The existing surveillance system now also includes biological incidents, e.g. bioterrorism in all Nordic countries.
- All Nordic countries have signed an agreement with the P4 Laboratory of the Swedish Institute for Infectious Disease Control ("SMI"), including joint financing of stand-by preparedness.
- Requirements for joint development of vaccines, anti-toxins, etc. are being studied.

Preparedness for chemical incidents (C preparedness)

- The advisory services of all Nordic poisons information centres include information on risks, symptoms and treatment of exposure to chemical weapons.
- A common approach to personal decontamination is to be developed.
- Development and joint purchase of autoinjectors (against nerve gas) are in progress.

Purchasing and logistics co-operation

- Joint purchasing is being planned for medicines and medical equipment, including autoinjectors.
- Plans are being made for a preliminary study of the potential for joint production and storage of medicines and equipment.

Care and treatment capacity

- Co-ordination with the European Union's survey of capacity for specialist treatment.
- The potential need for special agreements, etc., for care and treatment is being studied.

Education

- All of the Nordic countries report annually to each other on the range and availability of educational programmes, especially those within the areas of A/N, B and C preparedness.
- A joint table-top exercise is being planned.
- Common educational programmes in special areas are being planned in co-operation with the Nordic School of Public Health.

Civil-military co-operation

- The Nordic surgeon-generals and others have been invited to participate in the annual Nordic conference on public health preparedness.
- The development and joint purchase of autoinjectors is being studied.