Regulations (1). The primary aim of the exercise is for assessors to agree on a set of common standards for interpreting assessment criteria, so that individual appraisals can be conducted on the strength of a uniform understanding of the system and the method.

Having said this, the co-ordination meetings should always include reporting and countersigning officers. Moreover, they should not result in a predetermined allocation of merit points to each official before the individual assessments have taken place. These meetings should aim at obtaining an estimate of the distribution of merit points, based on a broad comparison of all members of staff in the same grade, and provided that such an estimate derives from the judgements made by reporting officers about the performance and merits of their staff. In this case, a certain margin of flexibility should be maintained in order to take account of the situations where there are differences between the estimates and the results in terms of individual Career Development Reviews (CDR).

If the arrangements were not followed, reporting officers (in most cases, Heads of Unit, as immediate managers of staff) would be denied the means of fulfilling their duty and prerogative of carrying out genuine appraisals of the staff that they manage. That would be a very serious distortion of the system, and the Commission would be grateful if the Honourable Member would provide any information about any specific instance where it is alleged to have happened so that appropriate action can be taken.

In answer to Written Question E-1565/03: priority points, like merit points, can only be awarded on the basis of considerations of particular performance. Furthermore, the attribution of these additional points to officials deemed most deserving is governed by the rules laid down in Article 6 Article 3 of the General Implementing Provisions of Article 45 of the Staff Regulations (2) which set out clear attribution criteria that can be summarised as follows: Priority points are given to officials in recognition inter alia of their contribution to the attainment of wider goals than those directly related to their individual work plan and/or as a reward for special efforts and outstanding results. In order to allow for a meaningful differentiation of staff on grounds of merit, half of the available package of priority points has to be shared out among the very best performers in a given grade (this corresponds to broadly 15% of the population in the grade considered).

Directors and Directors-General are in charge of making the proposals for granting priority points for the very obvious reason that their position gives them a broader view of the department and of its staff.

In addition to these principles, DGs have adopted a few simple guidelines relating to the distribution of priority points and these guidelines have been brought to the attention of the staff.

The decision on the award of priority points is taken collegially and not by the Director General alone (since he/she will adopt the decision on the basis of the information received from, and on the proposals made by, managers) and with the involvement of staff representatives.

All these factors contribute to ensuring that decisions on promotion are taken on the basis of objective elements and as a result of a fair and transparent process.

(1) Adopted by the Commission on 26 April 2002.
(2) also adopted by the Commission on 26 April 2002.

(2004/C11E/223)

WRITTEN QUESTION E-1567/03
by Erik Meijer (GUE/NGL) to the Commission

(8 May 2003)

Subject: Avian influenza epidemic in the Netherlands and Belgium and option of vaccination as an alternative to the wide-scale preventive slaughter of healthy birds

1. Does the Commission recall the major problems with earlier outbreaks of animal diseases, which were tackled by the massive preventive slaughter of healthy cattle and pigs in the vicinity of the centres of infection, after which there was much discussion about better solutions in the future?
2. Is the Commission aware that the current epidemic of avian influenza or bird flu in the Netherlands provinces of Gelderland, North Brabant and Limburg and the neighbouring Belgian provinces of Antwerp and Limburg is once again being tackled by the preventive slaughter of huge numbers of birds?

3. Has the Commission a position on whether stamping out should be done from the centre of infection in the direction in which infection is spreading or from the surrounding area under threat towards the centre of infection, a controversy that has surrounded the way in which the outbreak has been tackled so far? Does the Commission advise Member States to adopt a specific approach?

4. Is the Commission aware of the protest action by the animal rights organisation GAIA against the Belgian Minister for Public Health, on the grounds that vaccination is also a serious alternative for dealing with avian influenza and that a vaccine is available?

5. What is so far preventing the use of vaccination to combat avian influenza instead of slaughter? Is it because of efforts to save costs on the part of the firms concerned or does vaccination jeopardise exports of poultrymeat?

6. What is the Commission doing to help prevent outbreaks of avian influenza in the future by encouraging preventive vaccination or making it compulsory?

Answer given by M. Byrne on behalf of the Commission

(26 June 2003)

Council Directive 92/40/EEC of 19 May 1992 introduced Community measures to be applied in the event of an outbreak of avian influenza in poultry (1). The control is based on immediate reporting of suspect cases, rapid diagnosis and the culling and destruction of all poultry on infected farms. Furthermore strict ‘bio-security’ measures and safeguard measures are prescribed.

The Directive also foresees that the competent authority may extend the above mentioned measures to other neighbouring holdings should their location, their configuration, or contact with the holding where the disease has been confirmed give reason to suspect possible contamination. This measure is applied on a large scale in the Netherlands as well as in Belgium. Under certain circumstances vaccination against avian influenza may be used to supplement the control measures. A decision on emergency vaccination around an outbreak may be taken by the Member State concerned, provided the fundamental interests of the Community are not jeopardised. Neither the Dutch nor the Belgian authorities have to date introduced such a request to the Commission, except for the vaccination of threatened birds, kept in zoos. The Commission authorised this by adopting Decision 2003/291/EC of 25 April 2003 (2).

The report on the vaccination against avian influenza adopted on 27 June 2000 by the Scientific Committee on animal health and welfare (Reference Sanco/B3/AH/R17/2000) recommends that vaccination against H5 and H7 subtypes should not normally be allowed. The possible use of emergency vaccination against viruses of these subtypes as outlined in the Directive should be retained.

However, an infection of vaccinated poultry remains possible. The administration of the vaccine is very labour-intensive, time-consuming and gives only protection after several vaccinations. In addition one should also consider the relative short productive live of poultry. In view of the highly infectious nature and rapid spread of the present virus-type, it does not seem to be plausible that emergency vaccination would prevent the acute spread of the disease in time.

The Commission has up to 12 May 2003 organised eight meetings of the Standing Committee on Animal Health and Welfare, and adopted fifteen Decisions that lay down additional control and safeguard measures after unanimous support by the Standing Committee (with the exception of two abstentions by one Member State). Although the Commission is aware of the controversy in society caused by massive culling of poultry, no valid alternative is at present available.
The Commission has in order to improve future policy, approved under the 'Fifth (EC) RTD Framework Programme', the research programme 'Pathogenesis and improved diagnosis and control of avian influenza infections' (Project Reference: QLK2-CT-2002-01454). The programme will be concluded in 2005, and aims amongst other objectives to study the development and application of marker vaccines in order to reduce transmission of infection, particularly for their use in densely populated poultry areas.

The Commission intends to evaluate the epidemic, and Directive 92/40/EEC will be amended if appropriate. However, a fundamental change in the control strategy, aimed at the eradication of avian influenza as quickly as possible, is not a valid option at present.


(2004/C 11 E/224)

WRITTEN QUESTION P-1583/03
by Jan Dhaene (Verts/ALE) to the Commission
(2 May 2003)

Subject: Cross-border rail travel

Cross-border rail travel is more expensive than normal train services. This is an anomaly in a Europe without frontiers. On top of this, it is not environmentally friendly as travel by car is being encouraged because it is too expensive to take the train. Fares for cross-border travel are even calculated at double the rate by the national railways, for instance on the connection between Courtrai in Belgium and Lille in France or the connection between Tournai and Lille.

1. As bank charges for transfers of funds within the EU have been reduced, why does the same not apply for people travelling by train?

2. What steps will the Commission take in the near future to tackle this matter?

3. Might it not be feasible to have a train subsidy for Lille 2004, European Capital of Culture?

Answer given by Mrs de Palacio on behalf of the Commission
(5 June 2003)

The Commission agrees that higher fares for cross-border rail travel as opposed to national rail travel are an anomaly in the internal market. This anomaly should progressively disappear with the completion of the European railway area as provided for in the Communication from the Commission to the Parliament and the Council Towards an integrated European railway area (1), which accompanied the legislative proposals put forward in the second railway package.

Fares for cross-border traffic have been determined within the framework of the Uniform Rules concerning the Contract for International Carriage of Passengers and Luggage by Rail (CIV), which is an appendix to the Convention concerning International Carriage by Rail (COTIF) of 9 May 1980 (2). Cross-border fares consist of the tariffs applicable on the network of a Member State, a boarding charge and a border supplement. This situation is difficult to justify or maintain within the framework of an integrated European railway area.

The Commission intends, according to its 2003 Work Programme, to table a proposal later in 2003 for a Regulation on passengers’ rights and obligations on international rail services, which will include provisions concerning the information to be provided to passengers on tariffs and fares. These issues have been and are still being discussed with the main stakeholders concerned by such provisions, i.e. the