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■ MEDICINE AND HEALTH POLICY

## France sets up action plan to tackle heat-related deaths

The French government set up on Aug 14 a nationwide emergency plan to cope with what health minister Jean-Francois Mattei described as a “veritable epidemic of deaths” related to heat. The action plan—put into effect a week into the record-breaking heatwave across Europe (*Lancet* 2003; 362: 543)—came with the news that at least 3000 people had died of heat-related causes from Aug 6–12.

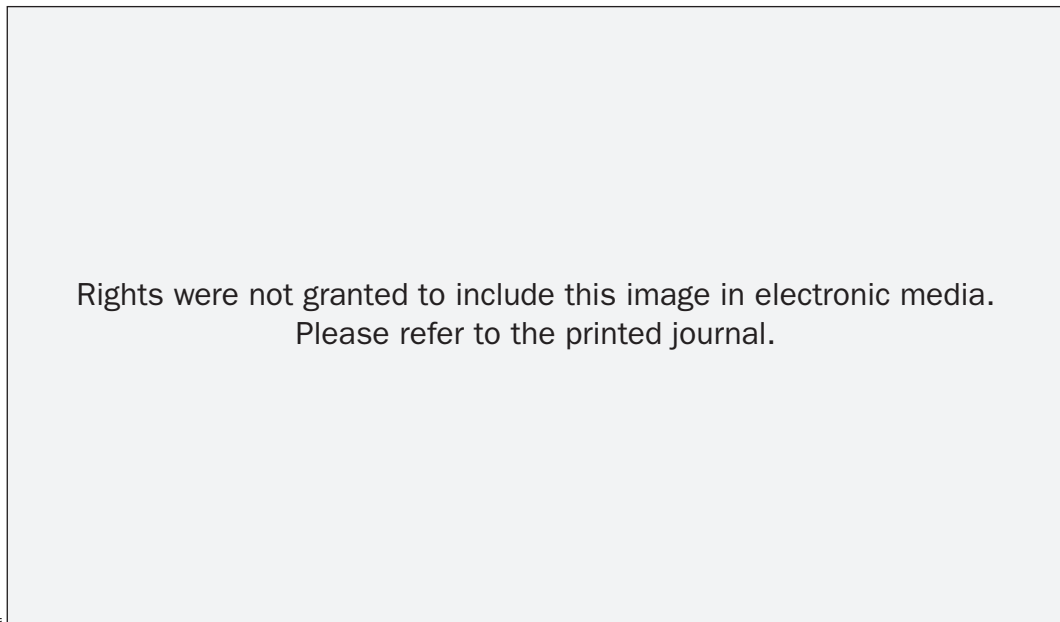
The “Blanc Plan” or “White Plan”—reserved for disasters, epidemics, or terrorist attacks—makes it possible to recall doctors and nurses from holiday and to make available extra staff, hospital beds, and temporary mortuaries. Last week, people who had worked in the country’s morgues were called out of retirement to help deal with the flood of corpses.

The decision, ordered by Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, was taken after intense criticism from several sectors including emergency-room doctors who said the government had not acted quickly enough to manage the crisis.

The Medical Association of Hospital Emergencies noted that from Aug 5–8, the number of deaths in Paris was substantially higher than last year: normally, about 30 people die each day in the Paris area, whereas the number this year climbed up to 180 a day.

However, as the death toll mounted, the government insisted there were no accurate statistics to prove the heat was to blame for the deaths. And Patrick Pelloux, president of the association, attacked the government for classifying the deaths as “natural”.

“They dare to talk about natural deaths. I absolutely do not agree with saying that”, he told the national press in Paris on Aug 10.



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**Morgues and cemeteries have been overwhelmed by the flood of corpses**

It was not until 4 days later that the government acknowledged the activity of the General Funerary Services had increased by 37% between Aug 6–12 (3230 deaths versus 2297 in 2002). The health ministry blamed the high death toll in part on the length of the heatwave and on the fact that many French buildings lack air conditioning.

From Aug 3–13, temperatures regularly exceeded 40°C, yet typically the temperature in August in Paris is around 23°C. In an Aug 14 written statement, the health ministry said: “Drawing on all the data, and taking account of extrapolations to apply to the whole of France, the number of the deaths tied directly or indirectly to heat during this period can be estimated at around 3000 for the whole of France”.

On Aug 18, France’s director-general of health, Lucien Abenheim, resigned. Mattei said the death toll from the heat could be as much as 5000.

Xavier Bosch

## Expert committee reviews SARS outbreak in Hong Kong

The SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) Expert Committee met in Hong Kong this week to review the management and control of the SARS outbreak in the former British territory and to make recommendations for Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa.

The fate of the Secretary for Health, Welfare, and Food, Eng-kiong Yeoh, rests on the report from the committee—chaired by two independent experts Cyril Chantler and Sian Griffiths, both from the UK—which is expected in September.

Yeoh was one of three ministers with whom the public was dissatisfied by the handling of the SARS outbreak that saw Hong Kong as the worst-hit area outside mainland China. A total of 1755 people were infected and 299 died.

Yeoh had previously chaired the committee, which is tasked not to assign blame but to pave the way for future handling of SARS; however, public opposition forced Tung to excuse the Secretary for Health, Welfare, and Food from the job.

Meanwhile, Margaret Chan Fung Fu-chun resigned from her position as Director of Health in the Hong Kong government to take up a senior job with WHO in Geneva as the director for the protection of the human environment.

Her departure from the government is seen as a vote of no confidence in an administration whose bias towards hospitals has made Hong Kong vulnerable to infectious disease outbreaks.

Mary Ann Benitez