

FOREWORD

Getting prepared to control the European spread of the new hypervirulent *Clostridium difficile* PCR ribotype 027

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With the threat of a new influenza pandemic that may develop as a result of the ongoing and uncontrolled panzootic of H5N1 bird influenza, emerging infections have never been so high on the public health and political agenda in western countries, Europe in particular. Although there is a strong tendency to assume that the next serious emerging infectious diseases will be caused by an RNA virus that 'jumped through' mutations or progressive adaptation from an animal reservoir to humans where it will spread and cause disease, there are other scenarios of emergence that western and European countries should consider. The emergence of the new hypervirulent *Clostridium difficile* PCR ribotype 027 in hospitals in Canada and the USA in 2003, and its secondary diffusion to hospitals in several European countries, including the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium and France, perfectly illustrates the diversity among modes of emerging infectious diseases. The free movement of European citizens, including patients moving from hospitals of one country to another, creates the potential for further spread of this hyper-virulent and multidrug resistant bacteria among vulnerable patients in European hospitals. The threat of the *C. difficile* PCR ribotype 027 will remain an issue of major public health relevance in Europe for years to come, and is further compounded by the fact that laboratory detection, surveillance, control and prevention

strategies concerning *C. difficile* infections in the hospital setting are highly variable within the European Union. Late recognition could thus delay appropriate responses and delay mobilisation of the necessary resources. A coordinated European approach is therefore necessary. Awareness, preparedness, capacity for detection, ongoing surveillance and timely response are the key issues in controlling emerging infections. Following these principles, and according to its legal mandate, the newly established European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) convened a group of experts comprised of microbiologists, infection control specialists and epidemiologists to assess the threat and to propose further steps to be undertaken at the European level. One of the outcomes of this initiative is a comprehensive review of the current knowledge, of the existing prevention and control strategies and of the challenges posed by the *C. difficile* PCR ribotype 027 which *Clinical Microbiology and Infection* is publishing as this special supplementary issue. The publication of this experts' report illustrates the contribution of *CMI*, in partnership with European institutions such as the ECDC, to preparedness against emerging infectious threats by increasing the awareness of the clinicians, infection control specialists and clinical microbiologists among its readership and beyond.