

ROLE OF OIE IN WORLD ANIMAL HEALTH MAINTENANCE

Jean-Luc Angot

Head, Administrative and Financial Department,
World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)
12 rue de Prony 75017 Paris, France
<http://www.oie.int>

Introduction

Preventing the spread of animal diseases and zoonoses through international movements is one of the important objectives of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). This is accomplished by establishing international standards and guidelines aimed at preventing the importation of pathogens dangerous for animals and humans while avoiding unjustified sanitary barriers and through surveillance, notification and control of diseases. The OIE was founded in 1924, before the creation of the United Nations. Initially 28 countries united with a mandate to share information on animal disease outbreaks to allow the Member Countries to take the appropriate control methods to protect themselves and to prevent further spread of the disease. There are now 167 OIE Member Countries. Providing a mechanism for prompt reporting of disease outbreaks/occurrences is still one of the primary roles of the OIE.

The OIE objectives and activities for the prevention and control of infectious animal diseases and zoonoses are focused on the following areas.

Transparency in animal disease status worldwide

Each OIE Member Country is committed to report to the information department on its health status regarding significant animal diseases and diseases transmissible to humans. The OIE then disseminates the information to all Member Countries to enable them to take appropriate action and to protect themselves.

Collection, analysis and dissemination of veterinary information

Using OIE network of internationally recognised scientists, Collaborating Centres and Reference Laboratories, the OIE collects, analyses and publishes the latest scientific information on significant animal diseases, including those transmissible to humans, especially regarding control and prevention methods

Strengthening of international coordination and cooperation in the control of animal diseases

Improving the legal framework and resources of National Veterinary Services

The OIE provides technical expertise to Member Countries requesting assistance with animal disease control and eradication programmes, particularly in developing countries. These activities are performed in coordination with and in support to other Regional and International Organisations and with donor countries and agencies responsible for supporting and funding the control of infectious animal diseases and zoonoses. Under OIE-World Bank Official Agreement, surveillance of animal disease is recognised as an international Public Good.

The OIE is strongly committed to convincing national policy makers and international donors that the cost of strengthening Veterinary Services so that they can provide better surveillance, early warning systems and

management of epizootics, including zoonoses, is negligible compared with the economic loss resulting from the accidental or intentional introduction of infectious animal diseases and zoonoses

Sanitary protection of world trade in animals and animal products while avoiding unjustified sanitary barriers. Guarantee of the safety of food of animal origin and promotion of animal welfare through a science-based approach

The OIE develops standards for use by the Member Countries to protect themselves against disease incursions as a result of trade in animals and animal products, while avoiding unjustified sanitary barriers. These standards are developed by experts from Member Countries and from the OIE's network of 170 Collaborating Centres and Reference Laboratories and in collaboration with FAO and IAEA/FAO Joint Division experts.

In 1995 the standards developed by the OIE were recognised by the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) of the World Trade Organization (WTO). In order to harmonise SPS measures and remove unjustifiable sanitary or health restrictions to international trade, the Agreement states that governments should use these international standards, guidelines and recommendations. The goal of the Agreement is to minimise the risk of importation of pathogens and to remove unjustifiable sanitary or health restrictions to international trade. The Agreement states that it is the sovereign right of a country to provide an appropriate level of animal and public health protection at its borders. However, this sovereign right is not to be misused for protectionist purposes: an importing country could only apply sanitary measures to imports if a similar level of protection is applied to all imports and internally by the importing country. Member Countries can introduce standards providing a higher level of protection than that provided by the OIE standards if there is a scientific justification, but these standards must be based on a science-based risk analysis.

ORGANISATION OF THE OIE

International Committee

The International Committee is the highest authority of the OIE. It comprises all the Delegates nominated by the governments of 167 Member Countries (as of May 2004) and meets once a year during the General Session in Paris in May.

Voting by the Delegates within the International Committee respects the democratic principle of one country, one vote.

The principal functions of the International Committee are:

- to adopt international standards in the field of animal health and zoonoses;

to adopt standards and resolutions for the control of the major animal diseases;
 to elect members of the OIE's statutory bodies (President and Vice-President of the Committee, Members of the Administrative Commission, Regional Commissions and Specialist Commissions);
 to elect the Director General of the OIE;
 to examine and approve the annual OIE activity report, programme of activities, financial report and budget presented by the Director General.

During the General Session, changes affecting the distribution of the major animal diseases throughout the world are closely monitored.

Administrative Commission

The work of the International Committee is prepared by the Administrative Commission.

The Administrative Commission, consisting of the President of the International Committee, the Vice-President, the Past President and six elected Delegates, represents the Committee in the interval between the General Sessions. Members are elected on a geographical basis.

The Commission meets twice a year to examine, in consultation with the Director General, technical and administrative matters, in particular the programme of activities and financial documents to be submitted to the International Committee for approval.

Regional Commissions

The five Regional Commissions study specific problems affecting the Veterinary Services and organise cooperation within each of the Regions:

- Africa
- Americas
- Asia, Far East and Oceania
- Europe
- Middle East

Each Commission holds a meeting every two years in one of the countries of the region to study technical items and regional cooperation on animal disease control.

The Regional Commissions also meet during the General Session of the International Committee. They report to the Committee on their activities and submit recommendations for final endorsement before implementation by the Director General.

The Director General and the Central Bureau

The Central Bureau, located in Paris, is managed by the Director General of the OIE. He is elected by the International Committee. The Central Bureau implements the strategies determined by the International Committee and coordinates the corresponding activities in the fields of information, international cooperation and scientific dissemination.

The Central Bureau also provides the secretariat for the annual General Session of the Committee, the various meetings of the Commissions and technical meetings held at the OIE. It also contributes to the secretariat for Regional and Specialised Conferences.

With the help of voluntary contributions from some of the Member Countries, the Central Bureau provides the impetus for activities such as organising regional training seminars and coordinating control programmes.

The Central Bureau has become an international resource centre at the service of animal health (including zoonoses) officials worldwide.

TOWARDS GREATER TRANSPARENCY IN THE ANIMAL HEALTH SITUATION WORLDWIDE

The OIE is the worldwide observatory for animal health. Its key mission is to keep national Veterinary Services and International Organisations informed of the appearance and course of epizootics in any country in the world that represent a threat to animal or public health (zoonoses). The system is based on official animal disease information that the Veterinary Authorities of OIE Member Countries have an obligation to report to the OIE. The use of standard reporting forms ensures that the system is fed with the required data in a standardised format. The strength of the OIE Animal Disease Information System is its 'legal' basis defined in Chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.3 of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and in Chapters 1.1.3 and 1.2.1 of the OIE *Aquatic Code*.

The OIE Animal Health Information System has the following components:

The International Early Warning System, which consists of an alert procedure to warn of exceptional epidemiological events (natural or intentional) occurring in Member Countries. Information is aimed at decision-makers and other stakeholders to enable them to take the necessary preventive measures. Under this system, the occurrence of a disease or any exceptional epidemiological event, including zoonoses, must be reported as soon as possible to the OIE Headquarters, which then redistributes the information through a variety of channels. Follow-up reports are provided weekly to allow end-users to follow the epidemiological situation as it develops.

The International Monitoring System, with procedures for gathering monthly and annual animal health data from around the world. Periodical information is collected for all OIE-listed diseases having the potential for rapid spread, adverse economic impact or having a zoonotic potential, while annual information is collected for 130 listed infectious animal diseases and zoonoses.

To improve the transparency of animal health information, OIE is developing a verification procedure for non-official information from various sources on the existence of diseases outbreaks that have not yet been officially notified to the OIE. These processes use different sources of information such as such as diagnostic results from OIE Reference Laboratories, scientific papers, field projects, newspapers, internet, Global Public Health Intelligence (GPHIN), ProMed, etc.

In order to improve the control of highly contagious diseases, OIE and FAO have recently developed a new initiative, called the Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (GF-TADs). The concept of this initiative is

based on a regional and international approach to animal diseases. GF-TADs will improve disease information and epidemiological intelligence. The Global Early Warning System (GLEWS) and response is an integral aspect of the GF-TADs programme. The GLEWS is defined as an instrument to be developed by FAO/OIE/WHO for the international community and stakeholders alike to assist in predicting and preventing livestock animal disease threats through epidemiological analysis and the integration of additional factors that might have an impact on the occurrence and spread of such diseases (e.g. economic factors, civil unrest, climatic changes, etc.). The most important action is to share information on animal health/zoonoses in humans among the three organisations. Results of disease information tracking systems are shared among the three organisations in order to search for additional information for verification purposes. OIE through its verification system would verify information with the Delegate of the Member Country. This will significantly improve the quality of official information.

While every effort is made to improve the OIE Animal Health Information System, the major difficulty encountered, as with any international activity, is the quality of the information received, especially information from countries where the resources available for Veterinary Services are inadequate (lack of trained veterinarians/epidemiologists, poor equipment and laboratory facilities, poor involvement of stakeholders in national surveillance systems, absence of disease control programmes, etc). In such countries potentially dangerous situations might go unnoticed or not be dealt with quickly, thereby increasing the risk of the disease spreading to other countries.

The OIE has a limited source of emergency funds for use in rapidly assisting Member Countries faced with exceptional epidemiological situations. Typically, these funds are used to send experts from OIE Reference Laboratories or Collaborating Centres immediately to assess the epidemiological situation in the field and prepare the actions of national authorities and other international organisations.

- Member Countries receive alert messages on disease outbreaks or suspicion thereof via fax or e-mail.
- The OIE annual compilation entitled *World Animal Health*, provides a wide variety of information on the animal health situation worldwide and reports on the disease control methods Member Countries apply.

A selection of all this information is integrated into *Handistatus* – a regularly updated computerised database available on the OIE Web site (www.oie.int).

Scientific information is disseminated through other publications, including the OIE *Scientific and Technical Review*, which contains research articles and guidelines of the very highest standard for animal disease control.

By collecting, processing and disseminating data on animal diseases throughout the world, the OIE endeavour to ensure transparency in the animal health situation worldwide for the benefit of its Member Countries.

TOWARDS IMPROVED HEALTH SAFEGUARDS IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The smooth flow of animals and animal products requires:

- the development and adoption by the international community of animal health regulations aimed at avoiding the risk of importing and spreading diseases and pathogens transmissible to animals and humans;
- the harmonisation and greater transparency of sanitary regulations applicable to trade in animals and their products so as to avoid unjustified sanitary barriers.

The WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures advocates the use of standards developed under the auspices of the Office International des Epizooties.

Various normative works, approved by the OIE International Committee, are designed to promote the harmonisation of regulations applicable to trade and animal disease control:

- The *Terrestrial Code*, for mammals, birds and bees, developed by the Terrestrial Animal Health Standards Commission, and the *Aquatic Code*, developed by the Aquatic Animal Health Standard Commission. They are updated annually and are available both as an electronic version on the OIE Web site and in a printed version. The Commissions are elected by the General Assembly of the Member Countries of the OIE.
- The *Terrestrial* and *Aquatic Codes* also have guidelines for disease reporting. These Standards state that Member Countries should proceed according to chapters 1.1.2 and 1.1.3 of the *Terrestrial Code* and chapters 1.1.3 and 1.2.1 of the *Aquatic Code* to notify disease occurrence. This information is then forwarded immediately to other Member Countries.
- The OIE now takes a proactive approach to disease reporting and will also report information on confirmed positive results provided by OIE Reference Laboratories or from unofficial sources, such as scientific publications, ProMed and lay publications after the information has been verified by the Member Country.

The *Terrestrial Manual*, developed by the Biological Standards Commission, and the *Aquatic Manual*, developed by the Aquatic Animal Health Standard Commission, presents standard methods for diagnostic tests and vaccine production to be applied notably in the context of international trade and national animal disease control programmes. Both texts constitute the reference standards for the international harmonisation of the diagnosis of animal diseases and vaccine control; they also contain specific chapters on sampling methods, packaging and transport of samples, quality management and biosecurity of veterinary laboratories, tests for sterility and freedom from contaminants, human safety in the veterinary microbiology laboratory, veterinary vaccine production, disinfection and inactivation procedures and laboratory methodologies for bacterial antimicrobial susceptibility testing.

- The OIE *Quality Standard and Guidelines for Veterinary Laboratories: Infectious diseases*.

This OIE publication describes the standards for the management, biosecurity and technical requirements for laboratories conducting tests for infectious diseases as well as specific details with respect to test method validation, reference reagents and laboratory proficiency testing.

Lastly, the OIE, through the work of the Scientific Commission for Animal Diseases develops and updates lists of countries recognised as being free from some serious diseases, most notably foot-and-mouth disease, bovine spongiform encephalopathy, rinderpest and contagious bovine pleuropneumonia. These lists make a substantial contribution to the health security of international movements.

TOWARDS OBJECTIVE AND IMPARTIAL EXPERTISE IN ANIMAL HEALTH

The International Agreement of 25 January 1924 establishing the OIE made it responsible for promoting and coordinating research on the surveillance and control of animal diseases throughout the world.

This objective has been attained by the creation of a worldwide animal health network, involving the setting up of Specialist Commissions and Working Groups, the designation of Collaborating Centres and Reference Laboratories, the organisation of meetings of experts and the continuing publication of scientific articles.

Specialist Commissions

The Specialist Commissions study problems of animal disease surveillance and control and questions relating to the harmonisation of international regulations.

The Terrestrial Animal Health Standard Commission contributes to the development, in collaboration with other Specialist Commissions, of the generic and specific chapters in the *Terrestrial Code*, promote the adoption by the International Committee of animal health (including zoonoses), animal welfare and animal production food safety standards, guidelines and recommendations concerning the trade or international movement of mammals, birds and bees and their products, and harmonised disease control regulations.

The Scientific Commission for Animal Diseases contributes to the development of better strategies and methods for animal disease surveillance and control. The Commission convenes groups of specialists of the highest standard, particularly in the event of an animal health emergency or to verify or evaluate the status of Member Countries in terms of specific animal diseases. The Biological Standards Commission harmonises methods for the diagnosis of animal diseases and the control of biological products, especially vaccines used for veterinary purposes. The Commission coordinates a programme to develop standard reagents aimed at standardising diagnosis.

The Aquatic Animal Health Standard Commission collects all available information on disease control methods for fish, molluscs and crustaceans. The Commission harmonises rules governing trade in aquaculture products as well as diagnostic methods. It also organises scientific meetings on these topics.

All the standards proposed by the various specialist Commissions need to be approved by the International Committee before publication. All the standards, recommendations and guidelines of the OIE relating to animal health, zoonoses and international trade in animals and animal products are recognised by the WTO.

OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres

These OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres, of which there are 170, covering 92 diseases and topics and located in 31 different countries, provide OIE Member Countries with support and scientific advice on all matters relating to the surveillance and control of animal diseases. This support can take many forms: such as the provision of experts (150 world renowned scientists), preparation and supply of diagnostic kits or standard reagents, seminars, courses, and organisation of scientific meetings.

Working Groups

Three OIE Working Groups are currently active:

Wildlife Diseases

Animal Welfare

Animal Production Food Safety

These Working Groups meet to review progress made in their subject field and to ensure that the information is made available rapidly to all OIE Member Countries. They also contribute to the organisation of scientific meetings, seminars, workshops and training courses.

The OIE Working Group on Wildlife Disease urges Member Countries to recognise the importance of wild animals as potential reservoirs (and even as targets of deliberately introduced biological agents) when planning responses to outbreaks of disease, exotic or otherwise.

The WGWD has determined that relatively few countries have developed plans for responding to any disease incursions that may affect wild animals. In order to assist OIE Member Countries that may wish to undertake such planning, the WGWD will, in the course of the next 3 years, review preparedness and response plans that may have already been prepared. The Group will identify from these plans the major components and information requirements essential to this planning. The outcome of the investigation will be reported to the OIE International Committee in 2005.

The OIE Working group on Animal Welfare developed a detailed work programme.

The International Committee had decided that the OIE would give priority to the welfare of animals used in agriculture and aquaculture and that, within that Group, the topics of transportation, humane slaughter and killing for disease control purposes would be addressed first, following by housing and management.

The OIE organised the first International Conference on animal welfare in February 2004.

The OIE Working Group on Animal Production Food Safety, established between the OIE and high level representatives of the *Codex Alimentarius* Commission, is responsible for hazards for consumers likely to occur during animal production (on the farm). This Working

Group also covers intentional actions likely to be done on the farm.

During the 72nd OIE General Session, Member Countries recognised that zoonotic diseases are emerging and re-emerging with great frequency, and indicated their overwhelming support for a greater OIE role in confronting the challenges of such zoonoses. They also recognised the need for coordination of activities among

animal and public health officials and organisations and vertically through national, state, and local groups. For this purpose Resolution No. XXIX was adopted during the 72nd General Session with a clear indication for including this activity in the fourth OIE strategic plan (2005–2010) and to create an Ad hoc Group on Emerging Diseases with member from the Working Groups on Wildlife Diseases and Animal Production Food Safety, the Ad hoc Group on Epidemiology and other relevant bodies or experts, in particular OIE Reference Laboratories.