



## The OIE's Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres: the core of its scientific excellence

**01/03/2010** Pathogens have an extraordinary ability, that some might call an 'evil genius', to adapt. Only science can provide the continuous help we need to adapt our disease prevention and control methods accordingly.

The OIE is firmly committed to playing a central role in the worldwide control of animal diseases, including those transmissible to humans, by providing all countries with its know-how in the areas of governance and general policies for the prevention and control of these diseases. Furthermore, the Organisation also obtains far more specific recommendations on how to deal with each of the identified health hazards falling within its mandate.

To this end, the OIE collects and analyses the latest veterinary scientific information so as to ensure that its animal disease prevention and control methods can be constantly updated. This information is then disseminated to all its Member Countries. The system relies on a network of over 220 OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres throughout the world, covering more than 100 different diseases.

The function of OIE Reference Laboratories is to serve as world centres of expertise for OIE official listed diseases; they have particular responsibility for carrying out confirmatory diagnostic tests for these diseases and transmitting the results to the competent authorities of the Member Countries. Each Reference Laboratory has a designated expert, a renowned specialist, enabling it to provide the OIE and its Member Countries with high-level scientific and technical assistance and advice on topics within its mandate.

OIE Collaborating Centres are centres of expertise in a designated sphere of competence relating to the management of a particular issue (e.g. epidemiology, risk analysis, animal welfare or veterinary training) and their expertise in these different fields is placed at the disposal of all countries.

Thanks to the work and voluntary commitment of all these internationally renowned experts, the OIE ensures that the standards and guidelines it issues are soundly based on science. These standards and guidelines, regularly published in the OIE's *Codes* and *Manuals* for terrestrial animals and aquatic animals, serve as the official reference for the World Trade Organization (WTO), which bases its rules on trade in live animals and products of animal origin solely on scientific evidence.

The OIE's network of Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres provides Members Countries, and indeed the whole of the international community, with authoritative scientific opinions and advice on key topics, such as animal health and welfare, diagnostic techniques, food safety or veterinary training.

Since 2006, a laboratory twinning programme under the auspices of the OIE has been facilitating close cooperation between experts in the North and those in the South, thereby helping to extend still further the OIE's network of excellence. This network is the central core that enables our Organisation to remain at the forefront of world veterinary scientific expertise and successfully carry out its key activities. Without it, the OIE would be unable to fulfil its missions properly.

However, the challenge that we are facing today, given the worldwide emergence and recrudescence of zoonoses and their potentially serious public health consequences, is to strengthen the activities of Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres. We must enable these centres of excellence to maintain a high level of effectiveness, continuously capitalise on technical and scientific advances and, wherever possible, carry out the appropriate research programmes. The OIE is, therefore, seeking to promote mechanisms at the worldwide, regional and national level to strengthen support and funding for the scientific activities of existing and future laboratories in developing countries, while at the same time consolidating the activities of laboratories located in developed countries.

In the scientific field, the OIE works with other international organisations, notably FAO, WHO and IAEA. The OIE and FAO, for example, have set up a new global scientific network (OFFLU) to assist Veterinary Services in controlling animal influenzas. This network of laboratories continuously monitors avian influenza and other animal influenza viruses and works closely with the WHO influenza network to enhance public health protection.

Furthermore, the OIE/FAO joint programme 'GF-TADs' is aimed at achieving better control of priority animal diseases and, through its 'GLEWS' network (a component of the programme which is implemented in collaboration with WHO), takes into account information derived from disease surveillance and early warning systems.

Within the context of the 'One World, One Health' concept, it is important to mention the alliance between the OIE, FAO and WHO in this field. Recognising their joint responsibility in the fight against zoonoses and some other diseases, they have set up early warning systems and coordination and cooperation systems for the management of diseases at the human–animal interface. The OIE and its partners share the same vision, namely to improve diagnostic and health data analysis capabilities worldwide, a field in which the OIE's Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres are playing a crucial role.

Moreover, the OIE, in conjunction with FAO and WHO, is committed to facilitating the international transport of biological samples, which all too often encounters reluctance on the part of transporters.

The success of the first International Conference of OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres, held in Brazil in 2006, proved that the only way to address and resolve these different questions and topics is through the continuous strengthening of regional and global networks of veterinary scientific expertise. Four years on, I am extremely pleased that the OIE can once again demonstrate its commitment and gratitude to all the experts of its Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres by inviting them to OIE Headquarters in Paris, on 21–23 June 2010, for the Second Global Conference of OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres.

This will provide an opportunity to strongly reaffirm that scientific excellence is the basis of good governance and of every animal health achievement worldwide.

**Bernard Vallat**