

## PERSPECTIVAS FUTURAS DE LA SALUD PÚBLICA VETERINARIA EN LAS AMÉRICAS

Madam President

Minister of Health

President of the Pan American Veterinary Congress

Ladies and gentlemen

In my nearly 20 years in the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), I have noticed many changes. One that is relevant to the Congress is that I rarely, if ever, hear anyone asking now the question, why should PAHO be involved in veterinary public health. I believe that this change has come about because of increased awareness at all levels of the relevance of this discipline to promoting and protecting the public's health. Part of the misconception—if not ignorance- stemmed from the belief that veterinary public health dealt with the health of groups of animals as an end in and of itself rather than relating to those areas of human public health in which veterinary medicine has a particular interest, and in which its skills and knowledge can be applied with benefit. I was pleased to note a recent description of veterinary public health as:

“The contribution to the complete physical, mental and social well-being of humans through an understanding and application of veterinary medical science.”

The Pan American Health Organization can find in its constitutional mandates just and proper cause for embracing veterinary public health as conceived in these terms. The Pan American Sanitary Code has among its objectives, “The prevention of the international spread of communicable infections of human beings,” and also “The promotion of cooperative measures for the prevention of the introduction and spread of diseases into and from the territories of the Signatory Governments.” When the Code was signed 75 years ago, there could have been little appreciation of how this world would have shrunk figuratively so that these inter-country activities would assume such significance.

I will not dwell on the history of veterinary public health, nor of the 50 years of existence of the program in the Pan American Health Organization. Dr. James Steele, the pioneer of that program, will give you first hand information of the past which he will no doubt and with justification aptly characterize as glorious. I will concentrate on the current situation and give some perspectives of the future and especially how it will impact on the direction of program activities in the Pan American Health Organization.

In the pre-antibiotic era, communicable diseases perhaps represented the main challenge of public health, and veterinary public health must have been also concerned primarily with those diseases transmitted from animals to man. Some of the diseases have changed, but this preoccupation with zoonoses will continue and perhaps increase.

Traditional zoonoses, such as brucellosis, bovine tuberculosis and rabies have all but disappeared from developed countries, but are still very much present in the developing world. The current situation in the Americas is a good example of what can be achieved and is likely to be achieved. It is 17 years since the Americas decided to eradicate urban rabies and considered it feasible because almost all rabies cases result from contact with urban dogs. There has been slow and steady progress based on the development of a potent vaccine and the application of sound epidemiological principles in the vaccination campaigns. The number of cases of urban rabies is now about 30 % of what it was ten years ago and canine rabies has fallen by about 85% in that period. I can envisage the day when urban rabies will indeed be eliminated, and perhaps the development of new vaccines and innovative methods of application will also result in the elimination of wild rabies.

The perspectives for the elimination or at least control of these zoonoses are good, but there are phenomena that we think will make for the appearance of new zoonoses or the re-emergence of the traditional ones in new forms. There will be invasion of ecological niches previously unexplored and humans will be exposed to new agents. Environmental changes will occur that make for outbreaks of old diseases. Flooding and unusual exposure to rodents has resulted in outbreaks of leptospirosis and this is likely to

recur without notice, and sometimes, because of its rarity giving difficulty with the initial diagnosis. Important though these known zoonoses are, I am confident that with improved methods of surveillance and diagnosis, there will be a very reasonable chance of controlling them.

Of greater future concern are the emerging or re emerging diseases that are food borne. The recent national and international uproar over the newly identified zoonotic agent responsible for the bovine spongiform encephalopathy that has its human expression in Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, has heightened interest in foodborne diseases. This disease has not appeared in the Americas, but no one can guarantee that this will not occur.

But the exotic nature of this food borne disease should not blind us to the growing importance of food protection and other foodborne diseases. The limited data that we have, do indicate that we have some major challenges. Our system of diagnosis and epidemiological surveillance has to be improved and this must be one of the major challenges for the future. But in spite of this limitation, there is evidence that foodborne diseases are a growing problem which is mediated or aggravated by the lack of basic sanitation. Cholera, which appeared in Peru after an absence of almost 100 years, has become endemic in many countries. It is clear to us that consumption of foods that are contaminated because of lack of clean water and basic sanitation is the major reason for the endemicity of this disease

I see the countries of the Americas, as they grapple with these challenges, growing ever more conscious of the importance of an intersectoral approach to food protection with participation of the private and public sector, with the latter involving many government agencies. Our countries will cooperate to strengthen the analytical capability of their laboratories and there will be universal acceptance of the HACCP system in their inspection services.

This concern for safe food will be motivated by domestic considerations, as local populations have to be protected, but there will be two other driving forces. The growth of tourism in the world has been spectacular, with increases every year. It is arguably the world's largest industry and it is estimated that the number of international arrivals will reach one billion in 2010 and revenues will be 1.55 thousand million dollars. Last year, the Americas received 19% of international arrivals. This figure is, of course, much less than domestic travel. One of the major concerns of tourists is to avoid becoming ill from eating contaminated food, and outbreaks of food borne illness can have devastating effects on the local establishment as well as on the attractiveness of the country itself as a tourist destination.

But the aspect of foodborne diseases that will be of increasing importance to the world and in the Americas is the prospect of antimicrobial resistance. Foods may be a vehicle for transfer of this phenomenon, with animal foods being particularly critical. It is estimated that approximately half of all antibiotics produced are used in animal health, either to treat them or as growth promoting agents in food.

The seriousness of this problem is reflected in a Report from the House of Lords of Great Britain. It stated:

Misuse and overuse of antibiotics are now threatening to undo all their early promises and success in curing disease. But the greatest threat is complacency from Ministries, the medical profession, the veterinary service, the farming community and the public at large.

Part of the response to this challenge lies in the availability of rapid diagnostic tests for surveillance of antibiotic resistance and the careful attention to antibiotic use in animals. The latter is clearly within the responsibility of veterinarians.

Veterinary public health of the future will continue to see that production of food—particularly that derived from animals—is part of its remit. One of the most important

aspects of that responsibility will be to achieve a continent free of foot-and-mouth disease. The economic importance of this disease is enormous. There is the direct impact of the economic gains that accrue when previously foot-and-mouth-free countries are certified as being free of the disease without vaccination. It is not often appreciated how important agro-industry is in the Americas, and some believe that the engine of economic growth and prosperity for many countries, will depend on the efficiency of the backward and forward linkages of agriculture with other sectors. The collateral effects are also critical. The local domestic production of livestock makes for the participation of small producers in a whole range of activities related to their economic wellbeing.

The progress, so far, in the eradication of foot-and-mouth disease has been steady, and much credit must go to the South American Commission for the Control of Foot-and-Mouth Disease (COSALFA) and the Hemispheric Committee for the Eradication of foot-and-mouth disease (COHEFA). The success achieved so far must not lead to complacency, the threat of new outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease showed the absolute necessity for vigilance and cooperative action between countries. I cannot stress too much the aspect of surveillance. This Region has the reputation of having developed one of the most efficient surveillance systems in the world for foot-and-mouth disease and every effort must be made to have the kind of cooperation and prompt reporting to keep it both reliable and useful.

One of the dimensions we must include in any consideration of the future of veterinary public health in the Americas is that of interagency cooperation. The Inter American Institute for Cooperation in Agriculture (IICA), and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) both have programs that impinge directly or indirectly on the areas I have indicated above as important for the future of veterinary public health. There have been many interagency discussions and participation in events, but I remain to be convinced that our interagency cooperation is optimal or that we have the common platform that facilitates such cooperation. There is tremendous goodwill that needs to be translated into specific programs.

I envisage the Pan American Health Organization maintaining a strong program in veterinary public health based on its staffs technical excellence at the headquarters level, in the countries, and in our two centers—the Pan American Institute for Food Protection and Zoonoses (INPPAZ), and Pan American Foot-and-Mouth Disease Center (PANAFTOSA). The responsibility for technical cooperation in zoonosis has been transferred to PANAFTOSA. I see us collaborating with countries to achieve eradication of bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis—the current situation is such that these diseases can be eradicated. I envisage a hemisphere free of foot-and-mouth disease with a surveillance and control system that is the envy of the world. I see the countries of the Americas entrusting to PANAFTOSA the responsibility for inspection and certification of national programs while continuing to play its role as an international reference center for animal vesicular disease. I can imagine INPPAZ being the hub of international technical cooperation for the surveillance and prevention of foodborne diseases.

I foresee veterinary public health playing a pivotal role in disaster preparedness, relief and mitigation in the Americas. We are prone to many natural hazards, which when they are not adequately prepared for, become disasters. Post disaster epizootics are a real threat and the loss of livestock can be yet another burden the affected population must bear, with starvation as a possible consequence.

These are realizable dreams and I am confident that they will be realized. This confidence is born of the trust I have in the support of the Member Governments that have appreciated that care for the public's health involves many disciplines and many actors. There is no doubt about the place of veterinary medicine as one of those essential disciplines.

In another two years, the Pan American Health Organization will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> year of its continuous existence in service to the countries of the Americas. We will celebrate our centenary and the major emphasis will be on the achievements in public health in the Americas and the part played by our Organization. I am confident that

many of these national celebrations will include the progress achieved as a result of effective veterinary public health programs.

Mr. President, I refer to our centennial in two years, but I would hope that 50 years from now our successors will gather in one of our countries and celebrate 100 years of our veterinary public health program and give an account of how my dreams have come true and how other new ones have also been achieved. But for this to occur we will need constancy of purpose, sharp focus to our programs, and a firm adherence to that spirit of Panamericanism, which must be our watch word and motto.

The future of veterinary public health in the Americas is indeed brilliant.