The role of the veterinarian at the abattoir

18/11/2003  Food safety is an issue of increasing attention and concern throughout the world. Public health hazards related to food safety can become a risk to the consumer at various stages of the 'production to consumption' continuum. Recognising this challenge, the OIE has identified animal production food safety as one of its high priority initiatives. The Veterinary Services of our Member Countries are central to this mission. They have an essential role to play in the prevention and control of food-borne zoonoses, even when animals are not clinically affected.

An approach to food safety based on an analysis of the risks present at all stages of the food chain demands an integrated professional involvement at each step. The OIE’s work on animal production food safety is notably aimed at reducing food-borne risks to human health, first by preventing, eliminating or controlling hazards arising from animals prior to the primary processing of animals and animal products. In the field of zoonosis control, there is clearly a constant overlap between public health and animal health objectives. The sharing of competencies of veterinarians is therefore highly desirable, especially in countries where the application of public health and animal health policies is the responsibility of different government authorities.

The OIE has responsibility, under the terms of the WTO’s Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS Agreement), for elaborating standards, guidelines and recommendations to ensure at the international level the prevention, eradication or control of animal diseases and zoonoses. For its part, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) has responsibility, under the SPS Agreement, for food safety. CAC mainly addresses problems arising after the first processing of animals and animal products. The CAC and the OIE have therefore jointly developed strategies and mechanisms to co-ordinate and integrate their activities at all stages of the food chain.

At present, there is room for a significant improvement in many aspects of food safety control in terms of cost and efficacy, especially during ante- and post-mortem abattoir inspections and microbiological control processes. Measures should be tailor-made for the range and prevalence of hazards in the particular animal population. Management of all these hazards by the Veterinary Services needs to be carried out in a way that optimises the use of available resources in both the public health and the animal health sector.

The food safety regulatory reforms undertaken by a number of countries have sometimes led to changes in the traditional roles of the official veterinarian. In some countries, industry has now been given the primary responsibility for implementing food safety measures, with the Veterinary Services moving sometimes towards a verification and audit role. This also provides sometimes the official veterinarian with new opportunities, and the added responsibilities that
they entail, for example in the international certification of meat. In this context, the OIE still considers abattoirs to be key points in epidemiological surveillance for zoonoses as well as other animal diseases.

The fact that the first case detected during the foot and mouth disease epizootic in the United Kingdom in 2001 was in a pig abattoir clearly illustrates the relevance of this approach and the danger should it be called into question. The OIE must therefore continue to provide its Member Countries with standards and guidelines on ante- and post-mortem inspection in the production of meat in order to reduce hazards of public health and animal health significance, including in developing countries. Many developing countries do not yet have the resources to conduct on-farm surveillance of animal diseases and zoonoses, and hence often depend upon cases detected at the abattoir, notably during ante- and post-mortem inspections.

Regardless of the way in which these functions are organised within a country, it is important that relevant public health and animal health activities are integrated as fully as possible, so as to achieve cost-effectiveness and efficiency gains. The Veterinary Services should continue to play a predominant role firstly in defining how ante-mortem and post-mortem inspections are to be conducted, including identification and management of those controls that may be applied at the primary production stage, and secondly in implementing ante- and post-mortem inspection. The government authority should determine the requirements for the training and skills of all personnel involved and define clearly the key role of the veterinary inspector.

The OIE will continue to publicise and promote the fundamental role of the Veterinary Services in the area of food safety, both on-farm and at the abattoir level, notably by constantly collaborating with the CAC in order to develop standards, guidelines and recommendations that are in harmony.

Bernard Vallat