



THE LONG AND TORTUOUS WAY TO RABIES ELIMINATION: EXPERIENCES FROM THE AMERICAS COUNTRIES

O. Cosivi

■ Pan American Health Organization, 525 23rd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037, United States of America

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Ottorino Cosivi is the Director of the Pan American Foot-and-Mouth Disease Center (PANAFTOSA) of the Communicable Diseases and Health Analysis Department of the Pan American Health Organization. Dr Cosivi started his WHO career in 1993 as a Veterinary Public Health Officer working on zoonotic diseases; he then led the bioterrorism program at WHO, in 2008 was Acting Director of the WHO's Mediterranean Centre for Health Risk Reduction, Tunis and in 2009 Cosivi moved to PANAFTOSA.

SUMMARY

Each and every case of human rabies is not only a tragic event for the family and community, it is also the most obvious indicator of the failure of the health system and services: the tools to prevent such terrible deaths have been available ever since 6 July 1885. In the past 30 years the countries of the Americas have reduced by more than 95% the incidence of human rabies and by more than 98% the incidence of canine rabies. This success was facilitated through a regional action plan coordinated since 1983 by the Veterinary Public Health programme of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), now based at the Pan American Foot-and-Mouth Disease Center (PANAFTOSA). The action plan has four priority deliverables:

- a) access to timely post-exposure prophylaxis for the population at risk
- b) dog mass vaccination
- c) robust human and dog disease surveillance
- d) community mobilisation.

Instrumental to the success of the regional action plan has been its governance mechanism in the form of the fifteen Meetings of Directors of National Programs for Rabies Control in America (REDIPRA from its Spanish acronym). Its first meeting was held in 1983, with the decisions of REDIPRA been endorsed by the Inter-American Meeting, at Ministerial Level, on Health and Agriculture (RIMSAs), along with the technical cooperation provided to the countries by PAHO in response to requests from REDIPRA and RIMSAs.

Another characteristic of the region is that in all the Latin American and Caribbean Countries but one (Haiti), the Ministries of Health bear the weight of the rabies program, including the provision of free canine rabies vaccine, with the mass vaccination campaigns implemented through intersectoral arrangements, including different levels of government and partners. The Region now faces the challenge of moving towards targeted approaches for the identification and control of the remaining few pockets of disease, and also constructing a process of declaration of areas free of canine rabies-mediated human cases. Steps to this effect were discussed at the last REDIPRA 15 meeting held in September 2015 in Brazil. Among other outputs, the countries agreed to define the new regional elimination goal only after an exhaustive evaluation of the countries' capacities following a standard regional framework founded on evidence based on canine surveillance.