An OIE Reference Centre is designated either as an:

— **‘OIE Reference Laboratory’** the principal mandate of which is to function as a world reference centre of expertise on designated pathogens or diseases;

— **‘OIE Collaborating Centre’** the principal mandate of which is to function as a world centre of research, expertise, standardisation of techniques and dissemination of knowledge on a theme or a horizontal area of specialisation.

The first OIE Reference Centres were designated over 20 years ago. Terms of Reference (ToRs) and Internal Rules for Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres, and the Rules setting out the procedures for applications, designations, entitlements and obligations were formally adopted in May 1993. One of the obligations was to submit an annual report on the Reference Centre’s activities on behalf of the OIE.

In May 2011 the World Assembly of Delegates of the OIE adopted new ToRs and internal rules for OIE Reference Centres. For Reference Laboratories, the ToRs, while continuing to emphasise their role in developing and recommending test methods, storing and distributing reference reagents, providing advice, diagnostic support and training to OIE Member Countries, and their reporting obligations, now recommends laboratories to establish and maintain a network with other OIE Reference Laboratories designated for the same pathogen or disease and to organise regular inter-laboratory proficiency testing to ensure comparability of results, as well as to organise inter-laboratory proficiency testing with laboratories other than OIE Reference Laboratories for the same pathogens and diseases to ensure equivalence of results.

For Collaborating Centres, the new ToRs emphasise the importance at the regional level, of the services they provide. Collaborating Centres are encouraged to establish networks with other OIE Collaborating Centres designated for the same specialty, and, should the need arise, with Collaborating Centres in other disciplines.

There is a maximum of one Reference Laboratory per disease/pathogen per country, and a maximum of one Collaborating Centre per topic per region or, exceptionally, per sub-region (upon agreement of the Council).

Reference Centres are selected on the basis of their excellence and to achieve a geographical balance using a democratic procedure: applications are submitted by the Delegate and endorsed by the relevant OIE Specialist Commissions, Regional Commissions (for Collaborating Centres only), the Council and the World Assembly.
The integrity and credibility of the OIE is intimately tied to the quality of the science to which it has access on disease control methods and animal welfare. The OIE depends very heavily on its designated Reference Centres and disease experts for scientific advice and support, both to the Headquarters in developing standards, participation in ad hoc Groups and general advice, and to individual Member Countries.

At the 82nd General Session, Member Countries approved the undertaking of periodic evaluations of OIE Reference Centres to ensure their ongoing compliance with expected quality management systems and standards.

The OIE and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) are discussing ways to clarify the mandates of OIE and FAO Reference Centres to create synergy and avoid overlap.