



Veterinary legislation is the foundation of any efficient animal health policy

15/11/2009 The unprecedented challenges facing animal health and veterinary public health policies are becoming increasingly clear. Global trade, climate change and the emergence and re-emergence of diseases that can spread across international borders faster than the incubation period of the majority of priority animal diseases, make national Veterinary Services the key players in the prevention and control of animal diseases and in the improvement of food security, nutrition, food safety, veterinary public health and market access for animals and products. Furthermore, it is in those countries most severely affected by poverty and animal diseases on a daily basis that governments have the greatest difficulty in fulfilling these responsibilities.

In this context, veterinary legislation is a crucial infrastructure component for all countries. In many OIE Member Countries, the veterinary legislation has not been updated for many years and is obsolete or inadequate in structure and content for the challenges facing Veterinary Services in today's world.

As a starting point in considering the characteristics of effective legislation, it is important that the Veterinary Services have the authority to enter livestock premises and other establishments and take the actions needed for early detection, reporting and rapid and effective management of any animal diseases. Such actions include the capacity to seize animals and products, to impose standstills, quarantine, testing and other procedures; to control animals and products at frontiers; and to require the destruction and safe disposal of animals and all articles considered to present a risk of disease transmission and to public health. These are the Veterinary Services' core activities in the field of animal health control and veterinary public health and the legislation must give them the necessary authority to carry these activities out.

However, in today's world, the scope of the Veterinary Services' activities is much broader than in earlier years, when the legislation was often first promulgated. Society has increasing expectations regarding the rights of individuals and the humane treatment of animals. It is well recognised that livestock owners can be reluctant to report disease and may even seek to hide diseased animals if they fear that their animals will be seized by the authorities as part of their response to a disease outbreak. To facilitate disease reporting, the veterinary legislation should make provision for compensation of owners whose animals and products have had to be seized for disease control purposes. The details of compensation arrangements can be provided in other, more specific regulations, but the appropriate principles should be included in the veterinary legislation.

The emergence and re-emergence of diseases at the interface between human and animal ecosystems are an ever-growing concern to the OIE and its Member Countries. Globally, countries and international organisations have responded to this threat with the discussions around the 'One World, One Health' concept. At the national level, it is important to establish mechanisms for collaboration and cooperation between Veterinary Services and other governmental services, particularly those responsible for public health and the environment, including wildlife. Modern veterinary legislation should provide for effective linkages between the Veterinary Services and other relevant governmental bodies and describe their roles and responsibilities – including their joint responsibilities – for stakeholder communication.

Pathogens often breach the barriers between animals and humans and it is important for veterinary legislation to include appropriate arrangements that facilitate direct communication between Veterinary Services and other governmental bodies and provide a framework for joint activities. Veterinarians must always be in the front line in all matters relating to the control of animal diseases, including zoonoses, in farms, but the Veterinary Services do not act in isolation. The regulatory framework must be translated into concrete actions at the level of the farm and associated premises and this depends on cooperation between stakeholders, and especially private sector veterinarians and livestock producers and processors. Some key disease control concepts, such as zoning and compartmentalisation, depend on an effective partnership between producers and Veterinary Services. Veterinary legislation must establish a framework for stakeholder cooperation and partnership, including definition of the roles and responsibilities, rights and obligations of all partners involved.

I would also like to highlight that communication with consumers on animal health related issues is today a key responsibility of Veterinary Services. Consumer behaviour has a great bearing on food safety and the prevention of zoonoses and the Veterinary Services can contribute by communicating clearly on the risks associated with live animals and their products, and on effective risk management. In addition to food safety, consumers in many countries are concerned about animal welfare and seek information on how livestock are produced, transported and slaughtered. Veterinary Services are the key governmental organisations regulating and providing guidance on animal welfare. Veterinary legislation should establish an appropriate regulatory framework for animal welfare, including collaborative mechanisms with livestock producers to clarify their obligations, and provisions for communication with consumers and NGOs to inform them of government decisions and give them a channel for raising concerns.

Veterinary legislation must therefore be updated to address these emerging threats and modern societal expectations. With this goal, the OIE is taking important steps to support its Member Countries. In 2009 the OIE issued a guidance document for Member Countries (see OIE website at http://www.oie.int/eng/OIE/organisation/A_Guidelines_Vet%20Leg.pdf), providing a minimal framework to help them update their national legislation in accordance with international standards. These guidelines also stress that national legislation must scrupulously respect the separation between the legislative and the regulatory domain as laid down in the Constitution or equivalent basic texts of all countries, and that the Veterinary Services must have at their disposal all the legislative and regulatory texts necessary to ensure their actions in the entire country.

The independent evaluations done by the OIE on a voluntary basis to help Member Countries comply with the quality standards of the Veterinary Services (OIE PVS tool) consider the quality and the validity of the national veterinary legislation and regulations to be an essential component of the excellence of veterinary systems. When Member Countries that have

undergone the PVS evaluation process ask to benefit from the next support step, namely the “gap analysis” process, the updating of their legislation is a priority to improve the effectiveness of the Veterinary Services and help to bring them into compliance with quality standards.

In 2010 the OIE will be organising the first global Conference on Veterinary Legislation, in Djerba, Tunisia (see OIE website at http://www.oie.int/eng/A_LEG_VET2010/ENG_first%20announcement.pdf). I invite all OIE Member Countries and all those with an interest in animal disease control and veterinary public health to review the guidelines already published on our Web site, and to participate in the Conference.

Bernard Vallat