



79th OIE General Session

Opening Ceremony Paris, 22 May 2011

Inaugural address by Dr Carlos Correa Messuti, President of the OIE

Excellency the President of Paraguay,
Honourable Ministers, Excellencies, Delegates, colleagues and friends,

I have the honour and pleasure to extend to you a very warm welcome. We are preparing to undertake what promises to be an intensive and rewarding week's work and, as is the case every year, an opportunity for a cordial reunion between colleagues and friends.

I am also pleased to greet you on the 250th anniversary of the foundation of the veterinary profession. As you know, at the request of Claude Bourgelat, King Louis XV of France established the first ever national veterinary school in 1761, in Lyon, which was the forerunner of our modern-day institutions of higher education. Two reasons prompted Bourgelat to persuade the King of the importance of founding this first school of veterinary science, both intended to address the specific concerns of that period: first, to promote scientific methods for controlling animal diseases and, second, to find effective techniques for improving the health of horses, which were an essential instrument of war in those days. Bourgelat was also the first scientist to realise the benefit of comparative pathobiology between animals and humans, marking the very beginning of the 'One Health' concept.

The concern for animal health is age-old and universal. Since very early times, humans have domesticated a variety of animal species for their own benefit, in so doing amassing knowledge – at first intuitively and empirically – about preventing and curing the diseases affecting these species. When their animals became sick, humans would lose a means of livelihood, warm clothing, labour, transport or a faithful companion. Our ingenious human ancestors are sure to have noticed very early on that some of their animals' diseases were frequently transmitted to humans.

As the history of humankind gradually unfolded, veterinary science evolved into the vast body of knowledge with the scientific rigour that underpins it today. My address is not intended to sketch the progress of veterinary science and its contribution to general welfare, as many of our colleagues are certain to do so

during the course of this year: 'VET 2011'. I should just like to point out that veterinary science has kept pace with the development of human knowledge, benefiting from the great discoveries and technological advances of modern times. It has also progressed in institutional and organisational terms. After the formalisation of veterinary education in 1761, which we are commemorating this year, there was the creation of the OIE in 1924 and the start-up of its national and regional operational base, as well as the consolidation of national Veterinary Services, which are now considered as a 'Global Public Good'.

We currently find ourselves in a new phase of history, with vastly more complex situations and needs. Of course, we have at our disposal scientific and technological developments that were inconceivable in the past but we are also beset by problems and challenges that were inconceivable back in 1761 or even 1924. They include a world population boom, major cultural changes, the threat of natural resource depletion, the consequences of climate change and the intensification of trade and travel – all in a world that seems to have become increasingly cramped and vulnerable, in which humans are closing in on themselves against the unstoppable march of world globalisation.

To help resolve these complex issues more effectively, the veterinary profession must broaden its horizons, actively bringing in other professions and disciplines to complement it. We must continue to promote an integrated, multidisciplinary and multisectoral approach involving specialists from different fields, which must, of course, include human medicine. In addition, we must involve field professionals, academics, scientists, the production sector, industry and non-governmental organisations – in short, all stakeholders. This will provide us with a holistic view of the current situation that we can use to define it more comprehensively to find the most appropriate and effective solutions. This openness can only lead to our enrichment and growth as veterinarians.

The OIE will continue to discharge its core mandate in the areas of good veterinary governance, animal health, zoonosis-related public health, food security, food safety of animal products and animal welfare. It will also continue to contribute its experience, technical and scientific expertise and solidarity to achieving other human and planetary goals. One example is the momentum given by this year's conference to the problem of wildlife and its relationship with domestic animal diseases, as well as its consequences for the protection of global biodiversity and public health.

OIE Members have fully understood how important it is for our Organisation to complement its actions with those of other international organisations and institutions. Here again I will cite only one of a host of examples. The 'One Health' concept, coined and implemented by the OIE, WHO and FAO, is clear and gratifying proof of the cooperation needed to manage health risks arising from the animal–human–ecosystems interface, by preventing, detecting and controlling emerging and re-emerging diseases and the risk of their transboundary spread. All this for the benefit of every country and for current and future generations.

However, the international progress being made should be backed by equivalent cooperation at regional and country level, among all the national agencies responsible for matters such as animal health, public health, trade and environmental and biodiversity protection. A coordinated effort at national level will promote synergy between authorities with related responsibilities and help to ensure consistent national positions at the various international forums, which is all too often lacking at present.

I see this as a task for each of you as both veterinarians and national Delegates to the OIE – a task that needs to be strengthened within the government administrations of your respective countries.

The Council worked very intensively with the Director General at three meetings to arrange the programme for this 79th General Session. It made special efforts to ensure that the programme reflects the concerns expressed by a number of delegations at the previous General Session: for instance by allocating more time to discussion and exchanges of view among Delegates, as well as by making more room for aquatic animal-related activities.

We shall be tackling two important technical items this week: global food security and foot and mouth disease control.

Food security is a universal priority. Coupled with the desire to achieve world peace, one of the most genuine and urgent human aspirations right now is food and nutritional sufficiency. Nobody would deny that peace and food security are inextricably linked. Any further goal or development must be underpinned by these first two basic pillars.

Through the Millennium Development Goals and the responsibilities assumed at the World Summit on Food Security, the international community, with the strong commitment of Heads of State and Government, has made the firm decision to help build a better world for the one billion people still suffering poverty and hunger. This challenge can only be met by a universal joint effort in which the OIE plays a key role. Food of animal origin, including from aquatic animals, is the main source of first-class protein everywhere in the world, regardless of cultural differences among countries and infinitely diverse dietary habits and practices. However, it will only be possible to increase and intensify livestock production if this is accompanied by improved sanitary conditions in livestock production, in both commercial and backyard farms. Food production losses from animal diseases are estimated to average at least 20%. Our Organisation is working to help reduce these losses, as well as to increase livestock production. The OIE is also working to ensure the predictability of and universal access to international trade in animal products. All this does much to improve both food availability and accessibility.

Our second technical item is foot and mouth disease. In 2009, we held the OIE/FAO Global Conference on Foot and Mouth Disease: the way towards global control, in Asunción, Paraguay, and came away from it full of hope. Although the conference was a success in terms of Members' participation and interest, and major work was undertaken, the global incidence of foot and

mouth disease has not decreased as much as expected in the interim. While considerable progress has been made in controlling the disease in some regions, elsewhere there has been a reverse, with new outbreaks, even in developed countries.

This Assembly needs little reminding of the adverse commercial, economic and social impact of foot and mouth disease epidemics. May I say that our efforts to date have been insufficient and should be redoubled. We need to continue to work not only at national level but, most importantly, at regional and global levels, as it is impossible to consolidate and sustain individual progress without simultaneous overall progress. Naturally, the OIE should continue to work closely with our sister organisations, especially FAO.

This year we will declare the world free from rinderpest. It marks the successful end of a long campaign, which was the reason for establishing the OIE in the first place. This milestone shows that it is possible to eradicate an animal disease if international organisations persevere and coordinate their efforts. So I invite you to take up the baton that this successful eradication of rinderpest has handed us and to embark on a new and more strenuous race to free the world from foot and mouth disease (with and without vaccination), within a sensible timeframe. I am confident that we can achieve this goal.

In June 2012, we shall be holding the Second Global Conference on Foot and Mouth Disease in Thailand and it will certainly provide us with a good opportunity to assess the development of the actions emerging from this meeting.

In this General Session we need to finish updating our Basic Texts. This will enable us to modernise aspects of the OIE's operation that are currently governed by rules dating back to its foundation. The OIE, and the world at large, have changed a great deal since 1924 and, as a result, many of the founding rules no longer conform to the current situation. I trust that we shall now be able to bring the matter to a successful conclusion.

Three regional conferences have been held over the past year. I had the opportunity to attend two of them: the Europe conference in Astana (Kazakhstan) and the Americas conference in Montevideo (Uruguay). I very much regret having been prevented from attending the Africa conference by family reasons beyond my control but I followed its promising outcome closely. My participation in these meetings enabled me to observe the plurality of views, interests and needs of each of our regions *in situ*. It also strengthened my conviction that these differences, which at first sight appear to distance and separate us, are in fact the OIE's greatest asset and they blend evenly to form the common goals that identify and bind us as an institution.

We organised three successful global conferences: the Second Global Conference of OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres in Paris in June 2010; the First OIE Global Conference on Veterinary Legislation in Djerba in December 2010 (followed by the first training session for OIE-accredited legislation experts to take charge of national missions for the OIE

Veterinary Legislation Support Programme; and the OIE Global Conference on Wildlife in Paris in February 2011. This year we plan to continue preparing the Global Conference on Aquatic Animal Health Programmes, to be held in Panama in June, and the Global Conference on Rabies Control: towards sustainable prevention at the source, in the Republic of Korea in September.

The many tasks carried out by the OIE during the past year, which the Director General will describe in detail, have included improvements in communication, in particular the establishment of national focal points and the overhaul of our website.

I also wish to reiterate the importance that the OIE places on advancing veterinary governance, both globally and nationally. Our efforts still focus on national Veterinary Services, which we shall continue to strengthen, chiefly by implementing the OIE PVS pathway. Implementation of the PVS Tool has raised awareness among national policymakers of the need to allocate more resources to national Veterinary Services.

Veterinary governance should be directed increasingly towards prevention and be implemented on the basis of the health interdependence that countries now have. The OIE has sponsored comparative studies on the cost of preventing animal diseases versus the cost of controlling and eradicating outbreaks, which have demonstrated that taking action in 'peace time' is always advantageous from a health and economic standpoint. Preventive action by individual countries is beneficial to all the others and, conversely, one country's misconduct will inevitably affect all the others.

I wish to reiterate my public recognition for the work and commitment of Dr Vallat and his staff. All our Members agree that the OIE is an extremely efficient institution in terms of the work of its technical and administrative human resources. Although I have valued this efficiency highly ever since I served as a Delegate, since becoming President I have had the opportunity to strengthen my relationship with the staff and the Director General and to witness at close hand the enthusiasm and effectiveness with which they work. It makes me feel both reassured and heartened to be presiding over this Organisation.

Once again, may I express our gratitude to the voluntary donors of the World Animal Health and Welfare Fund, which has enabled the OIE to expand its range of activities and enhanced the gains that would have been achievable with only its limited regular funding. Without the Fund's financial support it would have been impossible for the OIE to have acquired the global influence it currently enjoys.

Before I conclude, I invite you to pay tribute to two OIE employees who died last November: Dr Jean Blancou, who was our Director General from 1991 to 2000, and Dr Abdoulaye Bouna Niang, who served as President of the OIE International Committee from 2003, then as member of the Administrative Commission and, lastly, as Regional Representative for Africa from 2008. Both were excellent veterinarians with a long and productive professional career. We all remember Dr Blancou as a dedicated and tireless scientist and an open, kind

and unassuming person, all qualities that he put at the OIE's service during his years as Director General. Apart from the valuable contributions that Dr Niang made in the senior positions he held in our Organisation, he was a well-liked figure for his friendliness and good nature. Personally I cultivated a relationship of sincere fellowship with Dr Niang and he always felt like a 'brother' to me.

This institution, and especially we, the OIE's human community, will always remember Doctors Blancou and Niang with appreciation and gratitude.

I wish to conclude by reminding you that the OIE is not just an institutional organisation, a headquarters in Paris, a group of technical and administrative employees. The OIE is essentially all its honourable Members. The OIE is you, the national Delegates: you are the OIE's 'owners' and rulers. What you decide based on the discussions and debates at this 79th General Session will determine the direction of the OIE and will be implemented and developed in the future. As President, it is my fervent hope that the consensus will be balanced and satisfactory for all and for the good of our institution. I wish you every success.

Thank you very much.
