

## Candidate institutes join the OIE laboratory network



**Professor Changchun Tu** - proud to become an OIE Expert for rabies

At the 80th OIE General Session (May 2012) in Paris, three Twinning Candidates were designated as OIE Reference Laboratories. The latest additions to the OIE Reference Laboratory network, Changchun Veterinary Research Institute (P. R. China), the National Centre for Animal and Plant Health (Cuba), and the National Veterinary Laboratory (Botswana) will be recognised for their expertise in rabies, avian mycoplasmosis, and contagious bovine pleuropneumonia (CBPP) respectively. Marking a milestone in the Twinning programme, these are the first Twinning Candidates to be granted OIE Reference Laboratory status.

Bernard Vallat, OIE Director General, said, "I am very happy with the OIE Twinning programme's achievements. That such a young programme has delivered three successful OIE Reference Laboratory designations should send a very positive message to the international community. We expect many more Twinning Candidates to become OIE Reference Centres in years to come".

The principal objective of OIE Laboratory Twinning is to establish more OIE Reference Laboratories and OIE Collaborating Centres (collectively termed OIE Reference Centres) in areas where there is a need; overall this will contribute to stronger global disease security.

## Additional funds urgently needed

OIE Twinning is a popular option for institutes aspiring to provide technical support to other countries. As of today OIE Twinning projects are delivering expertise and technical capacity to more than 40 institutes across the Americas, the Middle East, Asia, Africa and Europe. With at least as many applications in the pipeline, the popularity of OIE Laboratory Twinning is outstripping the resources available to fund new projects.

In short, Twinning has become a victim of its own success and funds are urgently needed to ensure that the programme continues to deliver much-needed sustainable benefits worldwide.

One of the strengths of OIE Twinning is that no one dictates to countries or regions what their needs are. OIE listens to national Veterinary Services about their needs, providing guidance and objective assessment

OIE Laboratory Twinning is the OIE's laboratory capacity building programme. Each project links an OIE Reference Centre (Parent) with an institute (Candidate) wishing to develop its technical capacity and expertise so that one day the Candidate can provide technical assistance for disease prevention, detection and control to other countries.

## Twinning website

For background and practical information please visit

<http://www.oie.int/en/support-to-oie-members/laboratory-twinning/>



The distribution of Parent and Candidate Laboratories clearly shows that Twinning is filling geographical gaps in expertise



An OIE team works with experts from Italy and Eritrea to review progress with a Twinning project for Brucella in Asmara

- through initiatives such as the OIE PVS pathway - when requested. Twinning helps countries to meet their own objectives. OIE wants to ensure that capacity building is sustainable and that laboratory networks are adequately resourced with enough work and sample throughput to sustain themselves.

The relatively low cost of individual Twinning projects contributes to sustainability. With projects costing an average of about 130,000 euros for 3 years and focusing on expertise

rather than infrastructure, participating institutes are those that have resources to sustain themselves once the project has been completed.

An important driver for Twinning is the individual and collective enthusiasm for the programme. Experts feel motivated because they enjoy Twinning, get satisfaction from its outputs, and benefits are there for both Parent and Candidate institutes.

## Gaps in global expertise put public health at risk

The best and most effective way to deal with many zoonoses is to reduce the risk of emergence in the animal source and to prevent spill-over to the human population; H5N1 avian influenza is the most recent and a classic example of this.

OIE Twinning responded rapidly to the H5N1 panzootic by launching 11 Twinning projects for avian influenza in Latin America, Africa, Central Asia and South-East Asia. In just four years Twinning made a valuable contribution to pandemic preparedness by establishing a truly global network of avian influenza expertise. This network is not only needed to ensure early detection and effective response to H5N1 in the animal source, but also to gather information about animal influenza virus strains to assist the WHO in preparing human vaccines. Twinning has been a key factor contributing to the success of the OIE-FAO network of expertise on animal influenza [www.offlu.net](http://www.offlu.net)

At the same time as building capacity at a national, regional and

international level, OIE Twinning is extending and strengthening global scientific networks.

With six Twinning projects underway for brucellosis and three for rabies, OIE Twinning is building veterinary expertise for other important zoonotic diseases. These projects will undoubtedly save human lives as well as protecting animal health and welfare, and improving agricultural productivity.

Many zoonotic diseases are well covered by the OIE Reference Centre network, but there are still not enough Reference Centres for some diseases, including Rift Valley fever, leishmaniosis, Japanese encephalitis and Q fever.

The response to H5N1 demonstrates the rapidity and effectiveness with which OIE Twinning can amplify global expertise for a disease. OIE is now urging its Member Countries to come forward with applications for Twinning projects to address other neglected diseases which threaten public health.



OIE Twinning responded rapidly to the H5N1 panzootic by launching 11 projects worldwide



Costa- JML. CPGM-Fiocruz- Brazil

Leishmaniosis is a debilitating zoonosis currently under-represented in the OIE Reference Centre network

## Life after twinning

For many Candidates the end of the Twinning project marks the beginning of a new era, as experts take on the responsibility for providing technical advice and support to other OIE Member Countries.

For Candidates hoping to make a successful OIE Reference Centre application, the post-Twinning period is a time to demonstrate that they can meet the OIE Reference Centre mandate before submitting an application; demonstrating

active international work is essential.

Resources are needed to maintain centres of expertise, and a firm commitment to supporting the Candidate during its post-Twinning life should be made by the national Veterinary Services before a Twinning project starts. This is one reason that the OIE is so fastidious in requesting letters of support from OIE Delegates during the project planning phase.

There are various ways in which Candidate institutes can be put on the map, advertising themselves as players at the international level. This should be considered during the latter stages of the Twinning project. Some ways to do this include, but

are by no means restricted to:

- Playing an active role in international meetings and conferences – posters, oral presentations, interventions in debates and discussions, joining meeting organising committees
- Publishing scientific papers
- Providing diagnostic/technical assistance to other countries
- Managing or participating in regional or international ring trials
- Actively engaging in disease networks such as OFFLU, rabies network, EU bluetongue network
- Providing experts for OIE missions

## Managing disasters and mishaps

Earthquakes, political uprisings, conflicts, extreme weather, disease outbreaks, asylum seeking, serious illness, and equipment failures have all impacted on Candidate and Parent institutes during the last three years, creating challenges for Twinning projects.

In February 2010, Chile was hit by a devastating earthquake measuring a magnitude of 8.8 on the Richter scale. The national avian influenza laboratory, engaged in a Twinning project with the USA, was amongst the casualties. Yet the drive to ensure business continuity meant that, despite severe damage to equipment and the building itself, a team of engineers and experts had the laboratory up and running again within just one week.

In 2012, a Twinning expert fled a workshop in the Parent institute to seek a new life in Europe. Attempts to find him proved fruitless. Highlighting some of the inequalities that exist in today's world – inequalities that make Twinning

necessary in the first place – this also flagged up a risk with trainings.

It is impossible to eliminate risks, but at least by anticipating problems in the project planning phase they can be more easily managed or their impact can be reduced.

Most importantly when a problem does occur, the focus should be on finding solutions and learning from the experience. In response to the case of the disappearing expert Twinning guidance was updated to reduce the burden of responsibility on experts, recommending that they should be given sufficient per diem to cover expenses but that they should not necessarily be given the total amount on the first day of a workshop.

Considering the number of international exchanges and the diversity of projects, Twinning has been remarkably incident-free. However, OIE is keen to help others learn from adversity and is grateful when experts share both positive and negative experiences.



*Istanbul, 2011 - Judy Stack and Sevil Erali host an international meeting at the closing workshop of the UK-Turkey Twinning project for brucellosis*



*Chile, 2010 – Following a devastating earthquake, damaged equipment lies strewn across the floor of the national avian influenza laboratory. Experts had the laboratory up and running again in just one week.*

### Coming up in the next edition

#### **'Twinning in the Arab spring'**

- Timm Harder from FLI talks about his experience of Twinning with Egypt for avian influenza

#### **'A small step to rebuilding a country'**

- Experts from the UK embark on a Twinning project in Afghanistan