

“A World United Against Infectious Diseases: Cross-Sectoral Solutions”

**Key note speech by Bernard Vallat, Director General of the World
Organisation for Animal Health**

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Her Royal Highness Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn

Your Excellencies and Honourable Ministers

Representatives of International Organisations

Distinguished guests and participants

Dear Colleagues

Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

Good morning and many thanks to the organisers of this event for inviting me to present a keynote speech at the prestigious 2013 Prince Mahidol Award Conference. It is a great pleasure and honour to participate in an international conference that recognises the need for cross-sectoral collaboration for the effective and sustainable control of high priority infectious diseases that affect humans and animals and have an animal source at its origin. For this reason, I am delivering this speech on behalf of the three organisations, also called the “Tripartite” that is, FAO, WHO and OIE. I thank my colleagues from these organisations for giving me the honor to represent them.

Over 60% of human pathogens originate from animals. Influenza virus H5N1, anthrax, SARS, HIV AIDS, leptospirosis, rabies and Nipah virus are just a few examples.

An unprecedented increase of movement of people and commodities worldwide, the increasing interactions of humans with the environment, deforestation, climate change and variability, urbanisation, the intensification of animal production in response to growing global demands for proteins of animal origin such as milk, eggs and meat, economic development, and the international trade in exotic pets are just some of the factors that have provided greater opportunity for transmission of pathogens between human and animal species. This has changed the eco-biology of infectious agents including vector borne disease spread and resulted in pathogens crossing the species barrier between wildlife, domestic animals and humans leading to increased threats to protected species and biodiversity as well as the health of domestic animals and humans.

A risk factor not always mentioned is the use of animal pathogens as bioweapons because of their potential impacts on human health, agriculture, and food security. Animal pathogens have been used as bioweapons throughout history. About 80% of the pathogens that could potentially be used in bioterrorism are of animal origin and many have a proven link with wildlife.

Direct contact with animals is greater in developing rural areas of the world where animals constitute a source of capital income, dietary protein, house-ware, clothing, and transport; and are used for agricultural purposes, including traction in harvesting, land preparation, and the sustainable production of manure for cultivation. Untreated or undiagnosed infected animals can be a source of contamination of the environment and of the food and the water to which humans are exposed. By targeting control measures at the animal source, we can prevent or greatly reduce the occurrence of a wide range of diseases in humans. It is frustrating to see that in the 21st Century, millions of people continue to contract zoonoses, often fatal, with significant socio-economic global impacts. It is surprising to see that many countries spend scarce resources on the treatment of human infections, and neglect investing a portion of their budget on the cheaper prevention of zoonotic disease in the animal source.

Animal diseases continue to restrict the availability of an affordable and safe food supply and can impact adversely on food security, a key component of public health and social stability. Veterinary Services play an important role in stabilizing society because they support a healthy and productive agricultural sector, and a nutritious and safe food supply. They also contribute in a significant way to protection of biodiversity and the environment.

Given this situation, activities directed to animal health improvements must be recognised as a global public good, as well as are those concerning public health. And there should be no gaps between actions oriented towards public health and animal health.

To address the need for a coordinated management approach to address health risks at the wildlife/domestic animal/human/ecosystems interface, the OIE organised a Global Conference on wildlife entitled “Animal Health and Biodiversity – Preparing for the Future”, in collaboration with FAO and WHO, in Paris (France) in 2011. The recommendations of the Conference emphasised the need for organisations to work with multiple partners and provide guidance for future cross sectoral actions..

Animal pathogens can travel with amazing speed and don't respect national borders. Weaknesses in the Veterinary Services of one country can threaten neighbouring countries, regions and even the broader international community with disease. Unfortunately today many National Veterinary Services remain weak due to years of underinvestment and poor governance.

Zoonotic pathogens that become established because of insufficient control efforts to stop the transmission cycle constitute a potential threat to human health and a continuing economic burden. Known zoonotic diseases in many low-to-middle income countries might not be adequately diagnosed, reported or controlled because of limited resources, poor capacity, lack of sufficient political will, or the absence of strong governance.

The most sensible way to prevent and manage zoonotic hazards is to adapt existing systems of health governance at the global, regional and national levels to ensure greatly improved cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination as well as harmonised approaches to the prevention and management of infectious diseases. Key tools we have in our hands to do this include

international standards, agreements and procedures such as WHO International Health regulation (IHR) for public health and OIE Performance of Veterinary services (PVS Pathway) for animal health as well as FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius standards on food safety.

The world is confronted with a range of critical issues that can only be addressed by multiple partners and sectors working together in a collaborative manner. Recognising the need for an agreed environment to reach a consensus on the best ways of working together on health risks at the animal-human-ecosystems interface, the OIE, FAO and WHO developed the Tripartite Concept Note tabled in Hanoi (Vietnam) in April 2010. This provides a strategic framework for collaboration, and seeks consensus on global measures needed to coordinate public, animal and environmental health policies more effectively at global, regional and national levels to reduce the risks of infectious diseases at the animal-human-ecosystems interface. Global health is complex, and therefore effective prevention and control measures require the contributions of multiple disciplines understanding each other and working together to achieve success.

The OIE, FAO, and WHO agreed to:

“...share responsibilities and coordinate global activities to address health risks at the animal-human-ecosystems interface for a world capable of preventing, detecting, containing, eliminating, in response to animal and public health risks attributable to zoonoses and animal diseases with an impact on food security”.

To illustrate the concept, I would like to mention some practical examples:

At the global level, we have selected and confirmed during the High Level Technical Meeting in Mexico three priority topics, namely antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic influenza, and rabies, as models that we can learn from and improve our overall approaches to working better together. We must recognise of course that there are other key issues linked to food security and food safety that also need ongoing collaboration. In fact, virtually no important global health issue can be characterized as purely “human” or “animal”.

The OIE, WHO and FAO created the Global Early Warning System, known as GLEWS, a platform shared by the three organisations to improve the sharing of disease information and intelligence, in particular early warning on animal diseases and zoonoses worldwide.

FAO and the OIE also created the mechanism known as OIE/FAO Network of Expertises on Animal Influenza (OFFLU) with the best scientists worldwide and we are now able to provide key information to WHO on influenza virus strains of animal origin thus contributing to the early preparation of influenza human vaccines recommended by WHO.

These few examples show how the OIE/FAO/WHO collaboration can make a difference in enhancing global health security with the support of scientific community, academia and all partners and stakeholders.

Following agreement to the Concept Note, the Tripartite organised, in November 2011, a High-Level Technical meeting to Address Health Risks at the Human-Animal-Ecosystem Interface in Mexico City (Mexico), with the support of UNSIC and the Government of Mexico.

On behalf of the OIE, FAO and WHO, I would like to convey the three essential messages for action, based on the key elements identified at the High Level Meeting in Mexico.

The key elements included:

One - The need for political will and high-level commitment between ministries involved in One Health (Agriculture, Health, and Environment/Natural Resources) and trust between the different stakeholders involved, as well as underscoring a common vision with priorities and shared benefits. In this regard:

- We must recognise that the most cost effective and sustainable ways of controlling infectious diseases at the animal-human-ecosystems interface is to target control measures at the source of diseases.

- We need to continue motivating national governments to invest in prevention and control at the source of infection, thereby preventing or reducing deaths and health problems related to zoonoses in humans and animals.

Two - The importance of strong and appropriate governance structures, aligned legal frameworks, and recognition of existing international standards such as the WHO International Health Regulations and the OIE International Standards on quality of animal health systems and for animal diseases including zoonoses. This will result in strong and effective health systems within the individual sectors, including the provision of stable and adequate resources. This is especially important for countries where the impact of zoonoses is higher.

- With appropriate governance structures, countries will be able to develop improved organisational structures as well as allocate proper resources for prevention and control systems. To improve animal and public health and enhance compliance with WTO/Sanitary and Phytosanitary standards, the OIE supports its Member Countries with the OIE PVS Pathway for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services. Governments are responsible for the good governance of animal health systems based on close public/private partnerships.
- It is important to recall that if one country fails, it may endanger its neighbouring countries, the region, the continent and potentially the entire planet.

Three – A joint cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination with an active data sharing, joint risk assessments, and a timely and transparent communication. . The implementation of joint cross-sectoral simulation exercises can be seen as a useful tool to test countries' preparedness plans and enhance collaboration in preparation for outbreaks that cannot be addressed by one sector alone.

We are convinced that implementation of these recommendations will contribute to a safer and better world while minimising bureaucracy and wasteful investments.

In conclusion, I would like to say that although much good work on infectious disease prevention and management has been done, it is critical that health systems be strengthened with improved multi-sectoral collaboration, coordination and the harmonisation and implementation of standards and relevant international Agreements within and between existing institutions. This will require political support and significant investment to ensure a sustainable approach in the fight against infectious diseases. The PMAC 13 Conference is highly relevant in allowing us to address key global health issues, and I would again like to thank the organisers and our sister organisations for asking me to deliver this address.

Thank you very much for your attention, I wish you a successful conference.

Bernard Vallat