

The Challenge of Emerging Animal Diseases and the International Trade

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Infectious animal and zoonotic diseases are assuming greater importance in the changing farming and trading systems of both industrialized and developing countries. Some emerging or evolving infectious diseases have the potential to quickly spread from local to international significance or to jump species barriers, including to humans. These diseases can have a serious impact on international trade and in the perception of the consumers with regard to the safety of animal derived products.

There is a significant interaction between both human and animal health, particularly today, when we face the emerging and re-emerging of animal and zoonotic diseases of unprecedented magnitude. The worldwide repercussions of these animal diseases have no historical precedents. We are at the threshold of a new era of emergent and re-emergent diseases that will have a tremendous impact on public health. The significance of its potential consequences have substantially influenced the acceptance of the concept of “Healthy Animals, Safe Food, Healthy People” and is reflected in the fact that various countries and international organizations have enacted their own norms and regulations. There is no doubt that the effects of globalization, industrialization, the restructuring of the agricultural sector, and the growing and sustained demand for animal proteins, are rapidly changing the foundations and the applications of policies directly related to animal health and food safety as well as to the safety of the food supply.

This new scenario of worldwide health, affects not only the importing and exporting countries, but all countries as a whole, due to the tremendous implications that such events could have on global trade. The recent incursions of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in Europe, Asia and North America, the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) epidemic that started in South East Asia (SEA), and the introduction of Foot and Mouth (FMD) disease in Europe, are typical examples of this new scenario.

The quick detection of these emerging, re-emerging and zoonotic diseases and the consequent reaction will be the decisive factor in order to be able to quickly overcome the threat posed by such events. The time lapse between appearance and detection are of the utmost importance, and therefore, the early detection of any new epidemiologic event constitutes a key element in the implementation of preventive and control procedures. It frequently happens that the disease has spread long

before it is detected and the appropriate authorities have been notified. Because of globalization, the increase in international trade and travel facilitates the spread of emerging pathogens around the globe. Such an example occurred during the 2001 FMD epidemic, due to the O1 PANASIA virus, which started in SEA and affected countries such as Japan and Korea among others traditionally FMD free countries, and finally initiated a tremendous epizootic in the United Kingdom (UK), affecting later France and The Nederland, with devastating consequences. Losses in the UK are estimated at more than 5.7 billion pounds in the public sector, and 9.5 billion pounds in the private sector.

The readiness of any country to face an animal emerging disease, and its capacity to respond, depend in great measure to the preparedness of its Veterinary Services. Unfortunately, the lack of infrastructures which support diagnostic laboratories, veterinarians, expert services and worldwide vigilance, are insufficient, and this fact is clearly seen among developed and developing nations. It is not difficult to comprehend why the methods to combat emerging diseases in many countries are less than effective. Another extremely important aspect that needs to be addressed is the quick and efficient manner on how to alert the consumer about the scientific based risks of these diseases with regards to food safety. The epidemics of BSE which began in the UK in 1986, and the more recent Avian Influenza H5N1 epidemic of 2005, are two very clear examples to keep in mind.

The majority of emerging diseases that have appeared in recent times have been of animal origin and almost all of them have been potentially zoonotic. Therefore, it is essential that both the Animal Health authorities and the Public Health authorities confront this issue in a coordinated manner. International organizations are bringing about joint efforts, and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) has clearly expressed in favor of strengthening the role that it should play when facing the difficulties that these diseases pose on a worldwide level. It appears as though the emerging and re-emerging zoonotic diseases will progressively become the most significant issue that Veterinary Services will have to face, and therefore, will ultimately result in the formulation of adequate norms and guidelines that will facilitate international trade. We must keep in mind that the fight against zoonosis begins with the elimination of the pathogenic agent at its natural source. This fact will play a major role, both at the national and international levels as well as with the veterinary services, the veterinarians, the breeders and those responsible for the wild fauna.

Effective global security can only be achieved if all trading countries conscientiously comply with the internationally agreed upon standards and guidelines, effectively training stakeholders and ensuring the availability of adequate human and material veterinary resources. Many countries share a common concern about the emergence of animal diseases and zoonosis or the deliberate misuse of pathogenic biological agents that could affect the public health as well as food and animal production. Existing methods of disease prevention and containment regulations as well as international guidelines and standards are available and should be followed in order to procure early detection and a quick containment. This is the challenge, and by achieving it, we will have a more “predictable and safe trade of animals and animal products.”

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