



The Role of the Veterinary Services in Food Safety

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Veterinary Services: definition

Veterinary Services means the governmental and non-governmental organisations that implement animal health and *welfare* measures and other standards and recommendations in the *Terrestrial Code* and the *OIE Aquatic Animal Health Code* in the territory. The *Veterinary Services* are under the overall control and direction of the *Veterinary Authority*. Private sector organisations, *veterinarians*, *veterinary paraprofessionals* or aquatic animal health professionals are normally accredited or approved by the *Veterinary Authority* to deliver the delegated functions.

Veterinary Authority: definition

- *Veterinary Authority* means the Governmental Authority of an OIE Member, comprising *veterinarians*, other professionals and para-professionals, having the responsibility and competence for ensuring or supervising the implementation of animal health and *welfare* measures, international veterinary certification and other standards and recommendations in the *Terrestrial Code* in the whole territory.

Background

- Historically, *Veterinary Services* set up to control livestock diseases at farm level. Emphasis on prevention and control of major epizootic diseases of livestock and zoonotic diseases.
- As serious diseases brought under control, scope increased to address production diseases of livestock, leading to more efficient production and/or better quality animal products
- Role of *Veterinary Services* traditionally extended from farm to slaughterhouse, where veterinarians have a dual responsibility – epidemiological surveillance of animal diseases and ensuring the safety and suitability of meat.
- In many countries, role of *Veterinary Services* has been extended to include subsequent stages of the “farm to fork” food chain.

Central role in food safety

- Education and training of **veterinarians**, including both animal health (including zoonoses) and food hygiene components, makes them **uniquely equipped to play a central role in ensuring food safety**, especially the safety of foods of animal origin.
- Several other professional groups involved in supporting integrated food safety approaches throughout the food chain
- *Terrestrial Animal Health Code Chapter 6.1.* provides guidance to OIE Members on the role and responsibilities of the *Veterinary Services* in food safety to assist them in meeting food safety objectives in national legislation and requirements of importing countries.

Approaches to food safety

- Food safety & quality are best assured by an integrated, multidisciplinary approach, considering the whole of the food chain.
- Eliminating or controlling hazards at source (a **preventive approach**) is more efficient in reducing or eliminating the risk of untoward health effects than relying on control of the final product.
- Approaches to food safety have evolved from controls based on good practices (Good Agricultural Practice, Good Hygienic Practice, etc.), via food safety systems based on **Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP)** to risk-based approaches using food safety risk analysis.

Risk-based management systems

- Development of risk-based systems influenced by WTO SPS Agreement - sanitary and phytosanitary measures shall be based on an assessment of risks to human, animal or plant life or health, taking into account risk assessment techniques developed by relevant international organisations.
- Risk assessment should be functionally separated from risk management to avoid interference from economic, political or other interests.
- SPS Agreement specifically recognises as the international benchmarks the standards developed by OIE for animal health and zoonoses and by the Codex Alimentarius Commission for food safety

Redefinition of responsibilities

- Traditionally, food operators held responsible for food quality and regulatory agencies charged with assuring food safety.
- **Food operators** now given primary responsibility for both the quality and safety of the foods they place on the market.
- Role of **supervisory authorities** to develop food standards (both processing and end product standards) and monitoring to ensure that food operators' control systems are appropriate, validated and operated in such a way that standards are met.
- In cases of non-compliance, regulatory agencies responsible to ensure that sanctions are applied.

Role in Application of Risk Analysis

- *Veterinary Services* play essential role in application of the risk analysis process and the implementation of risk-based recommendations for regulatory systems.
- Each country should establish its health protection objectives for animal health and public health through consultation with stakeholders (livestock producers, processors and consumers), in accordance with the social, economic, cultural, religious and political contexts of the country.
- These objectives should be put into effect through national legislation and steps taken to raise awareness of them both within the country and to trading partners.

Functions of *Veterinary Services*

- *Veterinary Services* contribute to achievement of health protection objectives through direct performance of some veterinary tasks and through auditing of animal and public health activities conducted by other government agencies, private sector veterinarians and other stakeholders.
- In addition to veterinarians, several other professional groups (e.g. analysts, epidemiologists, food technologists, human and environmental health professionals, microbiologists and toxicologists) involved in ensuring food safety throughout the food chain. **Close cooperation and effective communication between all involved is essential to achieve the best results from the combined resources.**

Delegation of tasks

- When veterinary or other professional tasks are delegated to individuals or enterprises outside the *Veterinary Authority*, clear information on regulatory requirements and a system of checks should be established to monitor and verify performance of the delegated activities.
- The *Veterinary Authority* retains the final responsibility for satisfactory performance of delegated activities.

At the farm level (1)

- *Veterinary Services* play a key role in ensuring that animals are kept under hygienic conditions and in the early detection, surveillance and treatment of animal diseases, including conditions of public health significance.
- *Veterinary Services* may also provide livestock producers with information, advice and training on how to avoid, eliminate or control food safety hazards, e.g. drug and pesticide residues, mycotoxins, environmental contaminants, in primary production, including through animal feed.
- Producers' organisations, particularly those with veterinary advisors, can provide awareness and training as they are in regular contact with farmers and understand their priorities.

At the farm level (2)



- *Veterinary Services* play a central role in ensuring the responsible and prudent use of biological products and veterinary drugs, including antimicrobials, in animal husbandry. This helps to reduce the risk of developing antimicrobial resistance and unsafe levels of veterinary drug residues in foods of animal origin.
- Chapters 6.6 to 6.10 of the *OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code* contain recommendations on the use of antimicrobials.

Meat inspection (1)



- Control and/or reduction of biological hazards of animal and public health concern by *ante-* and *post-mortem* meat inspection is a core responsibility of the *Veterinary Services* and they should have primary responsibility for development of relevant inspection programmes.
- Wherever practicable, inspection procedures should be risk-based and management systems should reflect international standards. The *Codex Alimentarius Code of Hygienic Practice for Meat* constitutes the primary international standard for meat hygiene and incorporates a risk-based approach to application of sanitary measures throughout the meat production chain.

Meat inspection (2)

- Chapter 6.2 of the *Terrestrial Code* contains recommendations for the control of biological hazards of animal and public health importance through *ante-* and *post-mortem* meat inspection which complement the *Codex Code of Hygienic Practice for Meat*.
- OIE and Codex collaborate closely in standards development and recommendations of OIE and Codex should be read in conjunction.
- For example, OIE participated actively in development of *Codex Guidelines for the control of Campylobacter and Salmonella in chicken meat*.

Meat inspection (3)



- The *Veterinary Authority* should provide for flexibility in the delivery of the meat inspection service.
- Countries may adopt different administrative models, involving degrees of delegation to officially recognised competent bodies operating under the supervision and control of the *Veterinary Authority*.
- If personnel from the private sector used to carry out ante- and post-mortem inspection activities, *Veterinary Authority* should specify competency requirements for such persons and verify their performance.
- *Veterinary Authority* should have systems for the monitoring inspection procedures and exchange of information gained.

Meat inspection (4)



- Animal identification and animal traceability systems should be integrated in order to be able to trace slaughtered animals back to their place of origin, and products derived from them forward in the meat production chain.

Certification of products for international trade

- Providing health certification to international trading partners attesting that exported products meet both animal health and food safety standards is another important role of the *Veterinary Services*.
- Certification in relation to animal diseases, including zoonoses, and meat hygiene should be the responsibility of the *Veterinary Authority*.
- Certification may be provided by other professions (a sanitary certificate) in connection with food processing and hygiene (e.g. pasteurisation of dairy products) and conformance with product quality standards.

Other roles of the Vet. Services

- The *Veterinary Services* play a central role in investigating outbreaks of food-borne disease all the way back to the farm and implementing remedial measures once the source of the outbreak has been identified. Close cooperation with all others involved is important.
- Veterinarians are well equipped to assume important roles in ensuring food safety in other parts of the food chain, e.g. by application of HACCP-based controls and other quality assurance systems during food processing and distribution.
- *Veterinary Services* can play an important role in raising the awareness of food producers, processors and other stakeholders of the measures required to assure food safety.

Optimising the contribution of the Veterinary Services to food safety



- It is important that education and training of veterinarians in food safety meets high standards and that there are national programmes for on-going professional development.
- OIE Conference “Evolving veterinary education for a safer world”, Paris, 12-14 October 2009.
- *Veterinary Services* should comply with OIE fundamental principles of quality given in Chapter 3.1 of the *Terrestrial Code*. Recommendations for evaluation of *Veterinary Services* provided in Chapter 3.2 of the *Terrestrial Code* and in the *OIE Tool for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services*.

Assignment of responsibilities, etc.

- Clear and well documented assignment of responsibilities and chain of command within the *Veterinary Services*.
- National Competent Authority should provide an appropriate institutional environment to enable the *Veterinary Services* to develop and implement the necessary policies and standards and adequate resources to carry out the tasks in a sustainable manner.
- The *Veterinary Authority* should collaborate with other responsible agencies to ensure that food safety risks are addressed in a coordinated manner.

Further information



For further information see:

- Chapter 6.1 of the *OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code*, which can be accessed via the OIE website (www.oie.int)
- *Codex Alimentarius Code of Hygienic Practice for Meat*, which can be accessed via the Codex website (www.codexalimentarius.org)