

# The importance of governance and reliable veterinary certification

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## Summary

Good veterinary certification is possible only if a country's veterinary governance complies with the quality standards of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

The standards in the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* stipulate that the main prerequisite for good veterinary governance is for Veterinary Services to be independent, that is to say they are able to carry out their mandate while remaining autonomous and free from any commercial, financial, hierarchical or political pressures that could lead them to make technical decisions that were contrary to OIE standards. Veterinary Services should include, in particular, a veterinary administration with nationwide jurisdiction for implementing the animal health measures and veterinary certification procedures recommended by the OIE and for overseeing or auditing their implementation. They should also include veterinary authorities and persons authorised by the veterinary statutory body to perform tasks under the responsibility and supervision of a veterinarian (veterinary paraprofessionals).

This veterinary governance must be sustainable over time in order to administer long-term animal health policies.

Good governance relies on appropriate legislation that is in compliance with OIE guidelines and on the requisite human and financial resources for ensuring its enforcement.

The evaluation of this governance, either by an importing country in the context of international trade, as authorised by OIE standards, or by the country itself (self-evaluation or an evaluation requested from the OIE [using the OIE Tool for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services]), helps to facilitate the proper operation of Veterinary Services and to ensure the reliability of any certification granted under the authority of the veterinary administration.

## Keywords

International trade – OIE – Quality – Standards – Veterinary certification – Veterinary governance – Veterinary Services – World Organisation for Animal Health.

## Introduction

Global demographics are changing and there is increasing demand for protein, especially animal protein, among the world's population. It is necessary, therefore, to ensure universal access to wholesome, good-quality food, to reduce poverty and to facilitate market access to animal products under decent sanitary conditions, thereby ensuring safe trade that is acceptable both nationally and internationally.

This calls not only for a political will shared by all Members of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), but also for the development of mechanisms for the early detection and prevention of, and rapid response to, animal diseases, including zoonoses, at national, regional and global levels.

It is therefore important for a country's Veterinary Services to have the capacity for early detection of infections, diseases and other epidemiological events within their own

country. However, it is also essential that they can quickly discover any unfavourable animal disease developments in neighbouring countries, by having permanent access to international animal health information.

It is also important to have a reliable national chain of command and information in order to ensure optimum animal health monitoring within the country, with knowledge of the actual situation on the ground so that any animal health developments within the country can be monitored and controlled.

Indeed, the control of epizootics relies chiefly on speedy access to the full range of information on a country's animal health status. Nowadays there are huge flows of people and goods travelling long distances in a very short time and, in many cases, the travel time is less than the incubation period of most infectious diseases. The containerisation of goods for transport compounds control problems.

This new situation calls for effectiveness and maximum responsiveness from Veterinary Services. To ensure a timely response, animal diseases, including zoonoses, should be notified to the OIE immediately and with full transparency via WAHIS (the World Animal Health Information System of the OIE).

The existence of a single, independent chain of command from the field to national level that includes documented functional links with all veterinary services, including private veterinarians, should guarantee utterly reliable veterinary certification for both domestic and international requirements.

Reliable veterinary certification is of crucial importance because it is this that ensures trust between partners during any transaction involving animals or animal products, whether at national, regional or international level. It is the cornerstone of the credibility of good veterinary governance in OIE Member Countries and guarantees the safety of world trade in animals and animal products.

## Prerequisites for certification

Continuous monitoring of trends in animal populations within a country, and in the products derived from them, calls for knowledge of the animals' health status with regard to any diseases or infections that may exist or emerge within the country. A sustainable mechanism for the surveillance and control of diseases or infections should be established at national level in order to detect, at the earliest opportunity, any possible occurrence of a disease or infection, in particular for diseases with the most

disastrous consequences on animal mortality and morbidity.

The country must organise itself in such a way as to prevent the spread of diseases or infections by carrying out animal health surveillance and control measures. These should include measures for the optimum control of animal movements and appropriate measures for any potential active or passive vector of disease or infection. The country must also be as transparent as possible at international level, by reporting any occurrence of an internationally notifiable disease or infection to the OIE (119 diseases on the OIE List) and respecting the principles defined in Chapter 1.1 (Notification of diseases and epidemiological information) of the 2010 versions of both the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* (hereafter referred to as *Terrestrial Code*) and the OIE *Aquatic Animal Health Code* (the *Aquatic Code*) (3, 4), including the provisions on emerging diseases. Safe international trade is in the interests of both importing and exporting countries.

The implementation of these public and animal health tasks requires efficient nationwide organisation, which relies on all veterinary structures and practitioners, as well as any persons acting under their authority. Veterinary Services play a key role in the surveillance and early detection of, and rapid response to, animal diseases (including zoonoses). By taking international obligations into account in the way in which they are organised and structured (2), Veterinary Services increase the reliability of the results they obtain in the performance of their duties.

## Veterinary governance

The principles of good veterinary governance are defined in Chapter 3.1. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and *Aquatic Code* (3, 4).

One of the main prerequisites for good veterinary governance is for Veterinary Services to be independent, that is to say they are able to carry out their mandate while remaining autonomous and free from any commercial, financial, hierarchical or political pressures that could lead them to make technical decisions that were contrary to OIE standards.

Apart from the need to have professional, impartial and objective judgement, another prerequisite is the ability of the Veterinary Authority to define, implement and administer long-term policies and to ensure their sustainability. The next requirement is for Veterinary Services to be capable of both internal and external coordination. Internal coordination means the chain of command.

Veterinary Services should be able to coordinate their resources and activities in the public and private sectors through a clearly defined chain of command, starting from central level (Chief Veterinary Officer) down to field level. This facilitates the implementation of all national activities relating to OIE standards, such as programmes for epidemiological surveillance, disease/infection control and eradication, food safety, and early detection of, and rapid response to, emergencies.

Many examples of collaboration between the official Veterinary Services and the private sector exist in both developed and developing countries. The institutional basis for the private sector to carry out certain official activities is provided by the OIE, notably in the *Terrestrial Code* (3). Recourse to the private sector must nevertheless be subject to clear procedures formalised by a legally recognised system, such as the animal health accreditation mandate (1), which has the advantage of combining in a single concept a number of legal provisions relating to the individual areas of collaboration between the official Veterinary Services and the private sector. Moreover, the animal health mandate can boost the network of private veterinarians in the field, secure its sustainability and foster a nationwide network of competent, logistically autonomous professionals who act as civil servants on an *ad hoc* basis whenever necessary, setting up and implementing animal health actions, all at a very favourable cost.

As regards external coordination, the Veterinary Services must coordinate their resources and activities with all the other competent authorities in order to perform their animal disease control and eradication duties to the full, taking into account the animals themselves and all the factors associated with disease onset or development, epidemiological surveillance, food security, food safety, early detection, rapid response to emergencies and animal welfare.

These other competent authorities include first and foremost the authorities (public and private) responsible for public health, agriculture (in the broadest sense) and the environment, together with research departments and certain non-governmental organisations, although this list is far from exhaustive.

There are many factors that ensure good governance, but it is worth highlighting the importance of having sufficient financial resources. They are essential for the continued operation of Veterinary Services, irrespective of political pressures, and for obtaining the material resources crucial to performing their duties, such as competent diagnostic laboratories with the necessary infrastructure and capacity (rapid access to such laboratories is essential).

Veterinary Authorities should define and document their policy, their objectives and their commitment to quality, and ensure that this policy is properly understood, established and adhered to at all levels of the organisation. If conditions permit, Veterinary Services can implement a quality assurance system tailored to their areas of activity and to the type, scope and volume of interventions they are required to carry out.

The evaluation of governance, either by an importing country in the context of international trade, as authorised by OIE standards, or by the country itself (self-evaluation or an evaluation requested from the OIE [using the OIE Tool for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services] [5]), helps to facilitate the proper operation of Veterinary Services and to ensure the reliability of any certification granted under the authority of the veterinary administration.

## Reliable veterinary certification

Compliance by the Veterinary Services of an OIE Member Country with the fundamental principles of good governance is important in enabling the Veterinary Services of other Member Countries to place their trust in the international veterinary certificates they issue, and for this trust to be lasting.

Some disease surveillance, prevention and control measures may be implemented by private veterinarians or by organisations involved in animal health monitoring. Certain organisations or private veterinarians may be mandated to help implement veterinary certification. In all cases, the public Veterinary Authority will retain ultimate responsibility for implementing the fundamental principles of animal health missions.

The safety of international trade and of animal products depends, from an animal health standpoint, on a combination of factors that ensures the flow of trade without incurring unacceptable risks to public and animal health.

Owing to differences in the animal health statuses of Member Countries, the OIE *Terrestrial Code* and *Aquatic Code* (3, 4) propose a variety of options.

Before defining the conditions for trade, the animal health status of the exporting country, the importing country and possible transit countries must be examined.

These conditions should be included in certificates whose models are approved by the OIE.

The stipulated conditions must be short and to the point, and should convey the importing country's requirements

clearly. This may necessitate prior consultation between the Veterinary Authorities of the importing country and those of the exporting country.

This consultation is used to specify the required conditions, so that, where appropriate, the signing veterinarian may be given an instruction note explaining the terms of the agreement between the Veterinary Authorities concerned. To facilitate understanding of the requirements of an animal health certificate, the certificate should be written in the language of both the countries concerned.

However, the requirements for certification should not include restrictions relating to diseases that are not transmitted by the commodity being traded.

## Responsibilities for veterinary certification

### Responsibilities of the importing country

The import requirements in the international veterinary certificate must ensure that the commodities entering the importing country comply with OIE standards. The certificate should not include guarantees of the absence of pathogens or animal diseases that are present on the territory of the importing country and that are not subject to an official control programme.

Only exceptionally should the certificate, following an appropriate risk analysis, provide for measures relating to pathogens or diseases not included on the OIE List.

The Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement), which governs trade between countries, promotes the use of animal health measures that have been harmonised among countries, based on international standards, guidelines and recommendations developed by the competent international organisations (the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the OIE). The Agreement does not, however, require any country to modify the level of protection for the health and lives of people and animals that it deems (and has proven to be) scientifically appropriate. The animal health measures required as part of certification must be based on scientific principles and sufficient scientific evidence. In addition, if the measures are for the purpose of securing an appropriate level of animal health protection for the country, they must be guaranteed by a scientific risk analysis that is 'transparent, objective and defensible', as described in Chapter 2.1. of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* (Import risk analysis) (3).

If a Veterinary Authority provides certificates or import requirements to persons other than the Veterinary Authority of another country, it must also provide a copy of these documents to this Veterinary Authority because the responsibility for such information rests with public Veterinary Authorities.

### Responsibilities of the exporting country

All exporting countries must be prepared to provide any importing country, on request, with the following:

- information about their animal health status and the national animal disease prevention, control and information systems that determine whether the country is free, or has zones or compartments free, of the diseases on the OIE List
- information about the regulations and procedures in force to maintain this freedom.

The Veterinary Authorities of exporting countries must, in particular, have official procedures for accrediting certifying veterinarians. These procedures should define the latter's duties and obligations, as well as the procedures for monitoring their activity and professional responsibility, including conditions under which they may be suspended or under which their mandate may be terminated. The Veterinary Authority must also ensure that certifying veterinarians receive the necessary instructions and training and must monitor their activity in order to verify their integrity and impartiality. The public Veterinary Authority of the exporting country is ultimately responsible for veterinary certification in international trade.

### Protecting the professional integrity of certifying veterinarians

The certificate must be established on the basis of strict ethical rules, chief of which is respect for and protection of the certifying veterinarian's professional integrity. It is also essential that the stipulated conditions include requirements for specific facts to which a certifying veterinarian can attest with precision and in all conscience. When a certificate attesting an animal to be disease-free is based solely on the absence of clinical signs and on the herd history it has only limited value. The same applies to diseases for which no specific diagnostic test exists or when the value of the test is questionable.

Certifying veterinarians should be authorised by the exporting country's Veterinary Authority to sign international veterinary certificates. At the time of signature, certifying veterinarians may certify only facts

known to them or facts that have been attested separately by another competent party. They must sign, at the appropriate time, only certificates that have been completed correctly and in full. Where the signature of a certificate is subject to the presentation of a supporting document, the certifying veterinarian must check the accuracy of this document.

Above all, the certifying veterinarian should have no conflict of interest arising from the commercial transaction involving the animals or animal products to be certified, and should be independent of the trading parties concerned.

Certificates must be designed in such a way as to minimise the risk of fraud, in particular by using a single identification number or other means to ensure their security. Hard-copy certificates must bear the signature of the certifying veterinarian and the official identifier (stamp) of the Veterinary Authority issuing it. Where a certificate comprises several sheets, each page must bear the unique number of the certificate, together with a figure denoting the page number out of the total number of pages. Electronic certification procedures should provide equivalent guarantees.

## Conclusion

Veterinary Services play a key role in the surveillance and early detection of, and rapid response to, animal diseases, including zoonoses. In order to improve animal health worldwide and, in particular, to control emerging and re-emerging diseases, it is necessary to strengthen Veterinary Services and to improve their governance, in compliance with the quality standards of the OIE *Terrestrial Code* (3). Good prevention, carried out by means of appropriate measures, has proven to be much less expensive than managing and controlling disease outbreaks.

It is essential that all countries in the world implement early detection and rapid response mechanisms in the case of an epizootic outbreak, along with effective surveillance measures. It only takes one country flouting its surveillance obligations to place the entire planet under threat.

Veterinary certification should be a reliable tool based on a country's real animal health situation and established in accordance with procedures that comply with the quality assurance standards of the Veterinary Services.

Compliance with the fundamental principles of good governance of Veterinary Services in the OIE *Terrestrial Code* is important in enabling other countries' Veterinary Services to place their trust in the international veterinary certificates issued, and for this trust to be lasting.



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